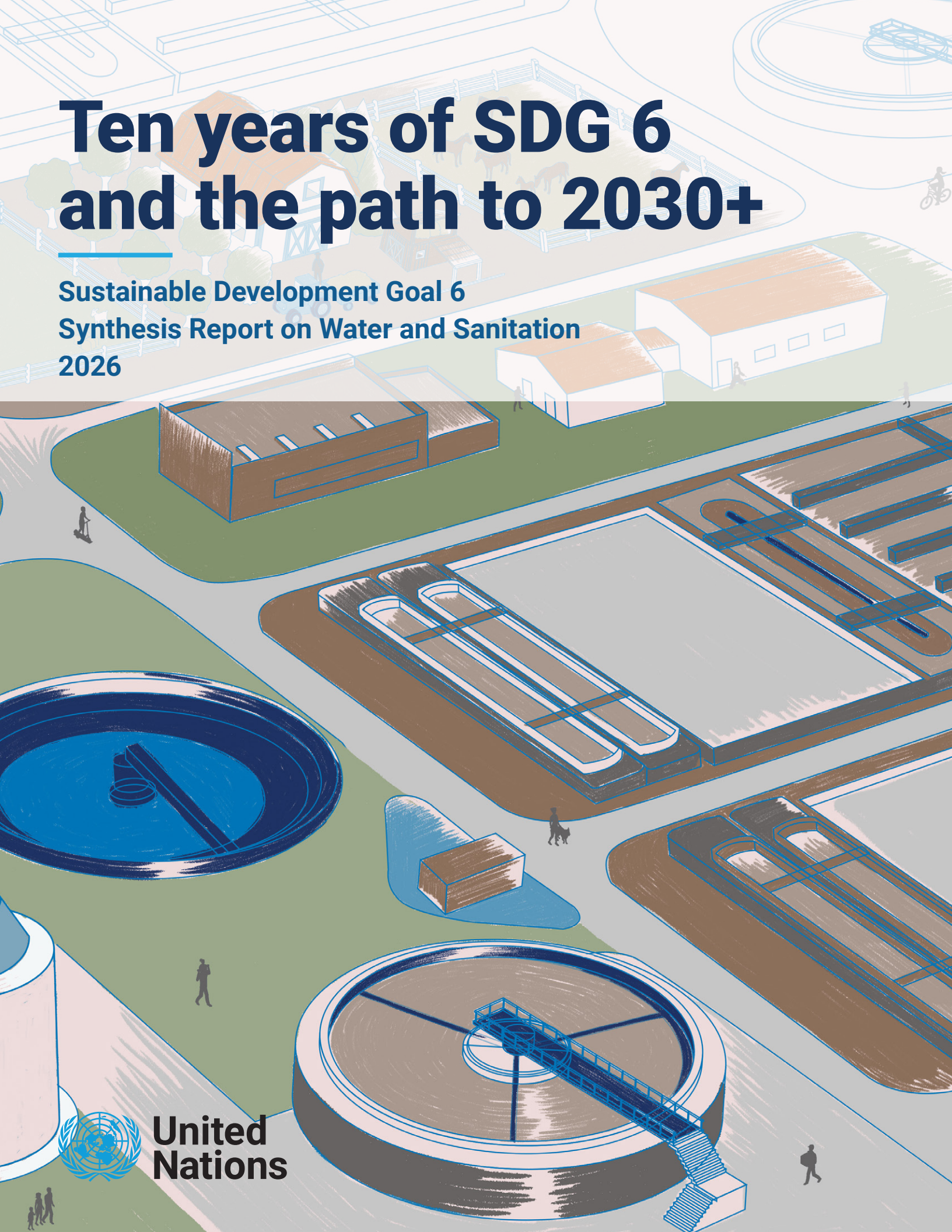


Ten years of SDG 6 and the path to 2030+

Sustainable Development Goal 6
Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation
2026



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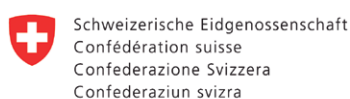
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Foreword

Safe water and sanitation can shape the health, stability and prosperity of every society.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes these critical systems as a catalyst for development. Sustainable Development Goal 6 provides a global framework linking the wide-ranging impacts of water and sanitation on health, education, human rights, productivity, decent jobs, gender equality, food, energy, climate change and economic resilience.

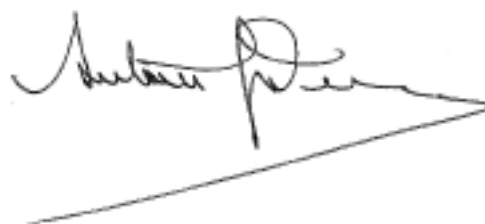
This report shows how governments have taken action over the last decade. These results prove that progress is possible when institutions, finance and monitoring efforts align and are supported by effective coordination mechanisms across sectors and stakeholders. Thanks to these efforts, hundreds of millions more people now have access to safely managed drinking water and sanitation services.

But, in many regions, critical weaknesses endure, including insufficient financing and service inefficiencies that perpetuate gaps in capacities, coordination and governance. Overconsumption, declining freshwater ecosystems, the disastrous consequences of climate change and competition for scarce natural resources are putting progress at risk. Taken together, these challenges drive hunger, disease, inequality, instability and a loss of economic potential.

This report is a call to action: to leverage water for people, planet and prosperity for decades to come. Guided by the data it presents,

governments need to dramatically strengthen the commitment, capacity and investment required to increase the speed and scale of progress.

With only a few years left before 2030, the window for action is rapidly closing. Now is the time to re-commit to water and sanitation as a powerful force for development, justice and peace for every community in the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'António Guterres', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

António Guterres
United Nations Secretary-General

Acknowledgements

Members and Partners of UN-Water prepared this report, coordinated by the UN-Water Expert Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development facilitated by Joakim Harlin and Fiona Gore, together with Kelly Ann Naylor (lead author), Maggie Kossida (lead author for Chapter 2), Joshua Newton (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 public consultation survey), Jon Marco Church (SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Studies), Caren Brown (editor) and the UN-Water Technical Advisory Unit.

This report contributes to advancing Priority Collaborative Action 1.2 of the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation by providing a comprehensive body of evidence and a forward-looking perspective on water and sanitation to inform decision-making and accelerate action at all levels. The main data sources for the SDG 6 targets and indicators used in this report were drawn from the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 coordinated by UN-Water.

The following SDG 6 custodian agencies and their representatives provided data and information:

Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, The Convention on Wetlands, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, United Nations Statistics Division and World Health Organization.

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Executive summary

- > **After 10 years of SDG 6 implementation, progress is already happening for billions of people, with more countries achieving measurable year-on-year improvements. Yet, while acceleration is under way, it is too slow and uneven.**
- > **With less than five years until the end of the 2030 Agenda, stronger resourcing, sharper execution, deeper partnerships and multilateral cooperation can turn ambition into results at scale.**
- > **SDG 6 has demonstrated the value of a dedicated global goal for water and sanitation. Lessons learned from a decade of implementation provide a strong foundation to sustain progress and shape the future of water and sanitation beyond 2030.**

Ten years of Sustainable Development Goal 6 and the path to 2030+

The adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) in 2015 marked the first time the entire water cycle was reflected in a unified, internationally agreed global framework. Over the past decade, SDG 6 has enabled countries and actors at all levels to align policies, set targets, mobilize resources, track progress, identify gaps and act on evidence to improve water and sanitation outcomes.

After 10 years of implementation, progress is already happening for billions of people. However, while national plans are yielding results and

stakeholder support is at an all-time high, much remains to be done. Gains remain uneven and incremental, with implementation gaps persisting.

The potential positive impact of “availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” is an unparalleled opportunity. With less than five years until the end of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), this is a critical juncture to accelerate towards that goal. Through stronger resourcing, sharper execution, deeper partnerships and multilateral cooperation, it will be possible to deliver more tangible results for people, prosperity and the planet towards 2030 and beyond. Closing the vast financing gap will require sustained political will and broader partnerships capable of crowding in capital from across sectors, including private capital.

This third edition of the United Nations (UN) SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation comes at the start of a strategic window of opportunity in the final years of the 2030 Agenda. The report provides the latest evidence needed to accelerate implementation of SDG 6. Looking towards 2030 and beyond, consolidated lessons learned from a decade of SDG 6 action will provide a solid foundation for the future of water and sanitation in the multilateral agenda.

The results are real – countries are delivering measurable progress

After 10 years of SDG 6 implementation, billions more people can access safer drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services; water-use efficiency has improved; and

more countries are applying integrated water resources management to balance competing needs for people, economies and nature.

While progress has not been uniform, the overall direction of travel is positive:

- Over 961 million people have gained access to safely managed drinking water services. 141 million fewer people rely on untreated surface water sources (target 6.1).
- About 1.2 billion people have gained access to safely managed sanitation services, and 1.6 billion people have gained access to basic hygiene services. The number of people practising open defecation has decreased by 429 million, with the practice now eliminated in urban areas (<1%) (target 6.2).
- 56% of household wastewater flows were safely treated in 2024. 56% of monitored water bodies in 120 countries were classified as having “good ambient water quality” (target 6.3).
- Global water-use efficiency increased by 19.5% between 2015 and 2022 thanks to increasing economic growth in all sectors. The world average level of water stress has remained almost unchanged, at approximately 18% (target 6.4).
- Nearly 60% of countries reached at least a “medium-high” implementation level of integrated water resources management in 2023, compared to 40% in 2017. 59% of the world’s transboundary basin areas has an operational arrangement for water cooperation (target 6.5).
- Between 2017 and 2021, around 50% of reporting countries showed degradation in at least one freshwater ecosystem type – an improvement compared to 61% of reporting countries in 2015–2019 (target 6.6).
- Official development assistance (ODA) commitments to the water sector increased

by 6% from 2023 to 2024. More than half of reporting countries indicated that external financing is mostly aligned with national plans (target 6.a).

- Most countries have defined procedures for participation in law or policy, and the proportion of countries with high levels of participation has increased during the SDG period (target 6.b).

SDG 6 has ignited a historic global effort to measure, manage and improve water and sanitation. Data availability has increased dramatically since the 2015–2019 period. The average number of countries reporting SDG 6 data in 2023–2024 increased by approximately 60%, while the average number of indicators reported per country grew from 5 to 8.9 out of 12.

Some significant SDG 6 data gaps still exist.

In 2023, only 17 countries covering 5% of the global population reported on the treatment of industrial wastewater flows. Data gaps also exist in ambient water quality monitoring, particularly in North Africa and most of Asia. Of the 2 million data records used for water quality reporting in 2023, only around 60,000 came from the lowest-income half of the world.

Progress is accelerating – but is too slow and uneven

Acceleration is under way for several SDG 6 indicators. More countries are achieving measurable year-on-year improvements, and the rate of progress in some countries and regions has increased compared to the period 2015–2019. While these acceleration trends are not universal, they signal areas where strengthened implementation, monitoring and institutional capacity may contribute to faster gains.

However, water stress remains critically high in several regions – Northern Africa and Western Asia subregions show worsening trends, with additional hotspots in Central and Southern Asia.

Global coverage of operational arrangements for transboundary water cooperation has expanded only modestly since 2015. And the percentage of basins with a negative trend in annual minimum river flow has increased in all SDG regions.

Acceleration is urgently needed to meet global targets. Achieving universal coverage by 2030 will require an eightfold increase in current rates of progress for safely managed drinking water, a sixfold increase for safely managed sanitation and a twofold increase for basic hygiene services. At the current rate, the world will not reach the global 6.5.1 indicator for integrated water resources management until at least 2049 – 23 years from now.

By 2030, projections indicate partial attainment of some SDG 6 subtargets in certain regions. Extending projections to 2045–2050 suggests that full realization of most SDG 6 targets is achievable, but would require a significant uptick in the pace of progress and implementation.

What we've learned so far – 10 years of implementation

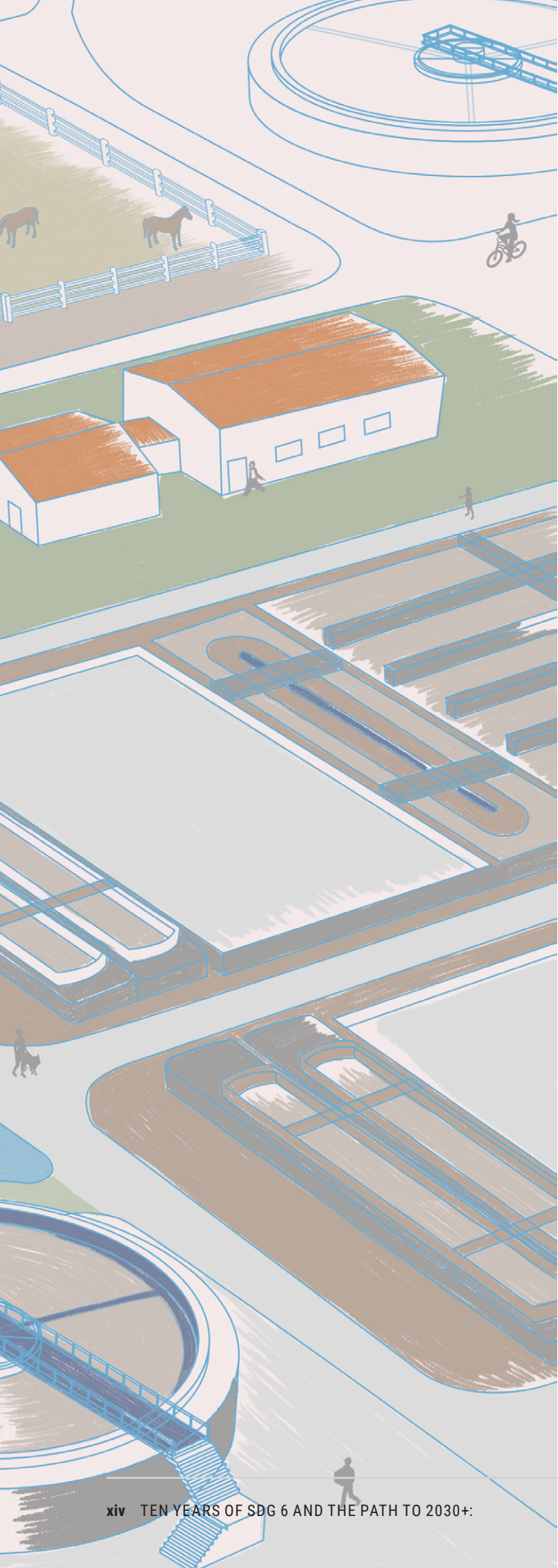
Looking beyond the numbers, SDG 6 has had a wide-ranging impact on policy and implementation, and has shaped countries' pathways to achieving progress.

After 10 years, implementation of SDG 6 has:

- > **Elevated water and sanitation as a political priority at all levels.** As part of the SDG framework, Goal 6 has strengthened visibility and legitimacy of water and sanitation issues, provided a widely recognized common reference point, and encouraged national and international commitments.
- > **Shaped policy development, fostered harmonization and inspired innovative approaches.** Countries have used SDG 6 to formulate policy, set national targets, align definitions, harmonize technical

standards, and strengthen institutional arrangements and delivery systems.

- > **Provided an entry point for strengthened coordination and cooperation.** More countries have enabling foundations to better coordinate water management across sectors and levels, including transboundary cooperation. SDG 6 provides an entry point for reflecting water issues in other policy areas and intergovernmental processes.
- > **Catalysed stakeholder action and generated strong support for a dedicated water and sanitation goal beyond 2030.** Stakeholders view SDG 6 as valuable for mobilizing political commitment and driving action, but call for stronger delivery mechanisms, stronger resourcing and closer links between policy commitments and operational realities.
- > **Strengthened UN system-wide coordination and delivery of water and sanitation priorities.** Through UN-Water, the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6, the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation, the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, the Water Action Decade, the appointment of the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water, and successive UN conferences on water, the UN system has enhanced coordination and joint delivery across mandates.
- > **Been constrained by under-resourcing.** Persistent gaps in capacity, governance, operational performance and financing have limited progress. Moving from fragmented project financing towards stronger systems and sustainable investment models is essential to accelerate implementation.

A stylized illustration of a rural landscape. In the upper left, there's a fenced area with two horses. A person is riding a bicycle on a path. Below the horses are two white buildings with orange roofs. In the center, a person is walking. To the right, there's a large, rectangular water treatment facility with multiple rectangular basins. In the bottom left, there's a circular water treatment tank with a staircase leading down to it. The background shows a curved path and a small structure on a hill.

A changing global landscape – opportunities and constraints

Significant shifts in the global context are also reshaping the scale, nature and interconnections of water- and sanitation-related challenges:

- > **Advances in science, technology and innovation** offer opportunities to better understand the changing water cycle and overcome barriers that have historically slowed progress.
- > **The evolving context of finance and capacity development** presents new approaches and operational pathways to establish the right financial architecture and institutional capacity to support and sustain SDG 6 progress.
- > **Water is increasingly seen as a “superconnector” for SDG acceleration and transformation**, and will be a pivotal determinant of sustainable development transitions and emerging economic sectors beyond 2030.
- > **Rising ambition for water and sanitation on the international agenda** generates opportunities for Member States to discuss water and sanitation issues as part of their interactions at the UN and to coherently mainstream water issues within other policy areas.
- > **Growing threats to UN water and sanitation programmes from falling ODA** come at a critical time when the UN system is poised to respond to rising Member State ambition and to scale up implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation.

The path towards 2030+ – from incremental to transformative progress

Moving from incremental and uneven progress to transformative change will require maintaining what is working, while making improvements to the systems, means and processes required to implement SDG 6 better going forward.

A UN multilateral approach for water and sanitation towards 2030 and beyond can be strengthened by:

- > **Accelerating, improving and transforming SDG 6 implementation** through a transformational shift in the approach to finance and capacity development for water and sanitation to support countries in scaling up implementation. Capitalize on the upcoming 2026 and 2028 UN conferences on water to align efforts and strengthen political will, partnership and international cooperation.
- > **Addressing water as a systemic driver of sustainable development** through strengthening cross-sectoral coordination and decision-making to ensure water is coherently integrated into national policies and plans. Continue mainstreaming water-related issues within existing intergovernmental processes by aligning efforts towards compatible policy objectives, targets and indicators.
- > **Enabling more structured and meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue** to improve stakeholder coordination and engagement in water and sanitation policies, plans and decision-making processes, as well as within existing and future water-related intergovernmental processes at the UN.

- > **Building on lessons learned from SDG 6 to improve future water-related goals** that better link high-level policy goals and targets with the means of implementation. Consolidate evidence and data to strengthen future goals and targets, including potential candidate indicators for a possible post-2030 framework.

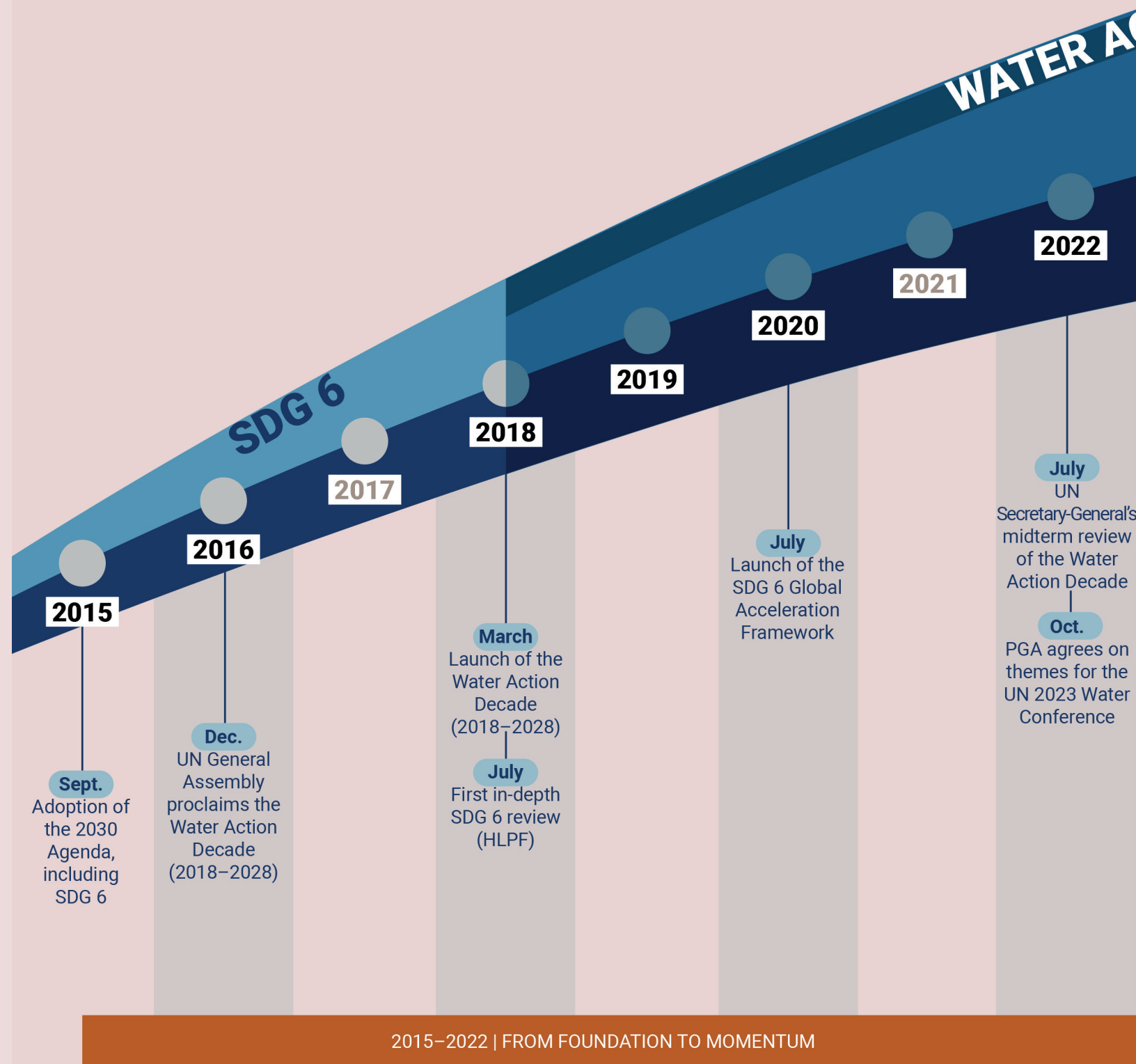
- > **Ensuring a future intergovernmental process for water at the UN beyond 2030.** Such a process could be convened within the UN General Assembly or Economic and Social Council, with substantive outcomes, including the possibility of intergovernmentally agreed declarations.

- > **Scaling up agile and effective UN system-wide support**, coordination and delivery of water and sanitation by strengthening water and sanitation programmes in individual UN entities and scaling up and localizing implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation. Enhance UN-Water by evolving its secretariat into a coordination office that serves the inter-agency mechanism.

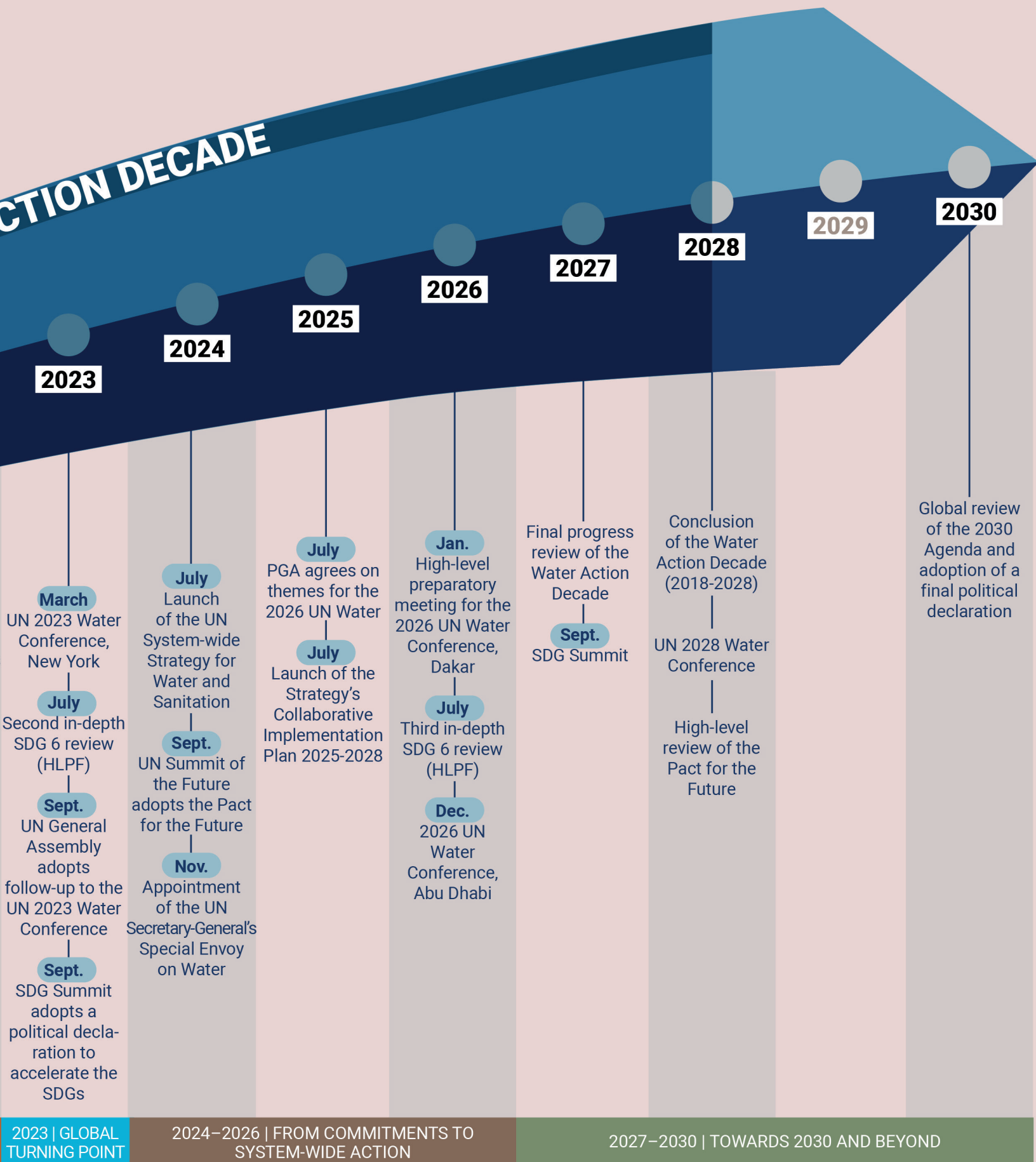
SDG 6 AND THE WATER ACTION DEC KEY MOMENTS (2015–2030)

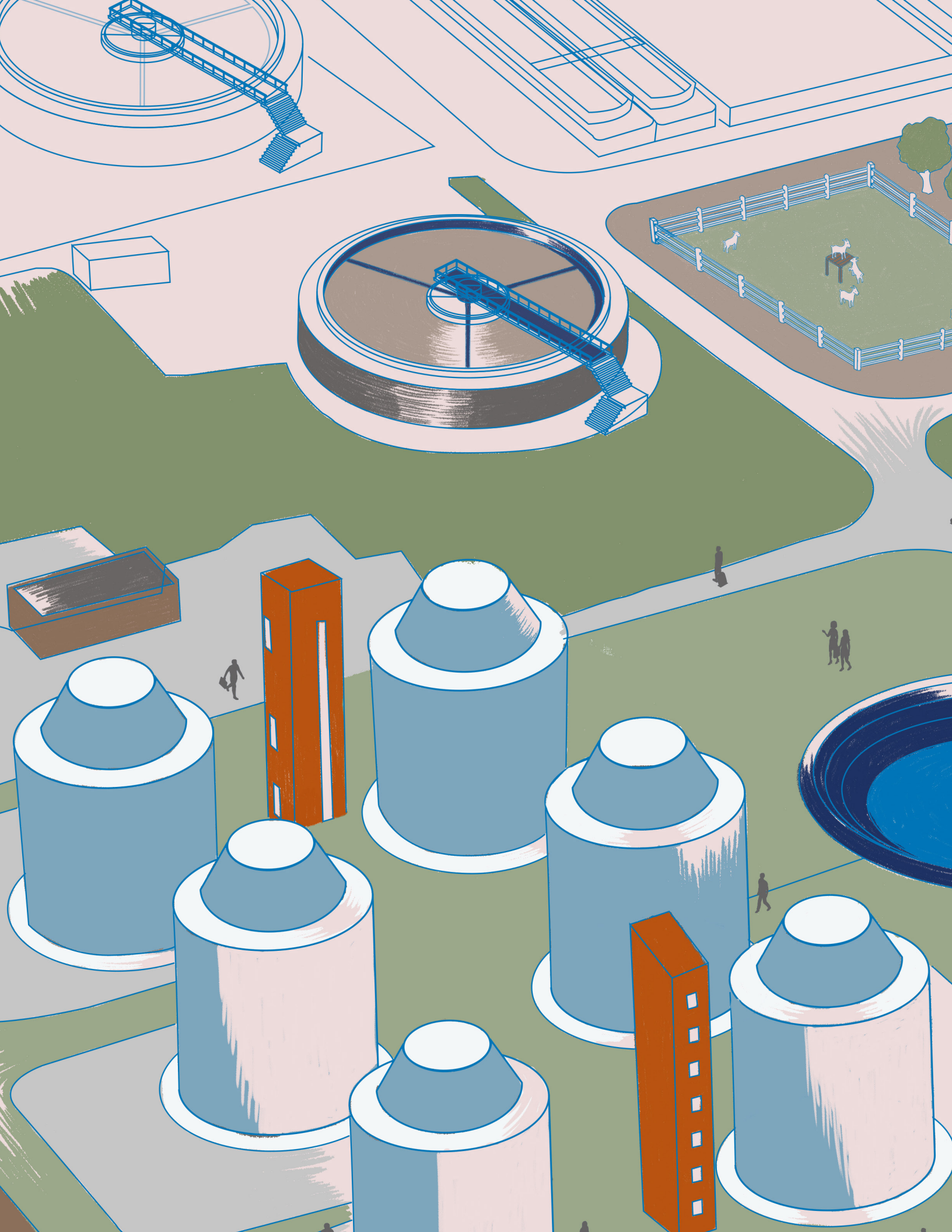


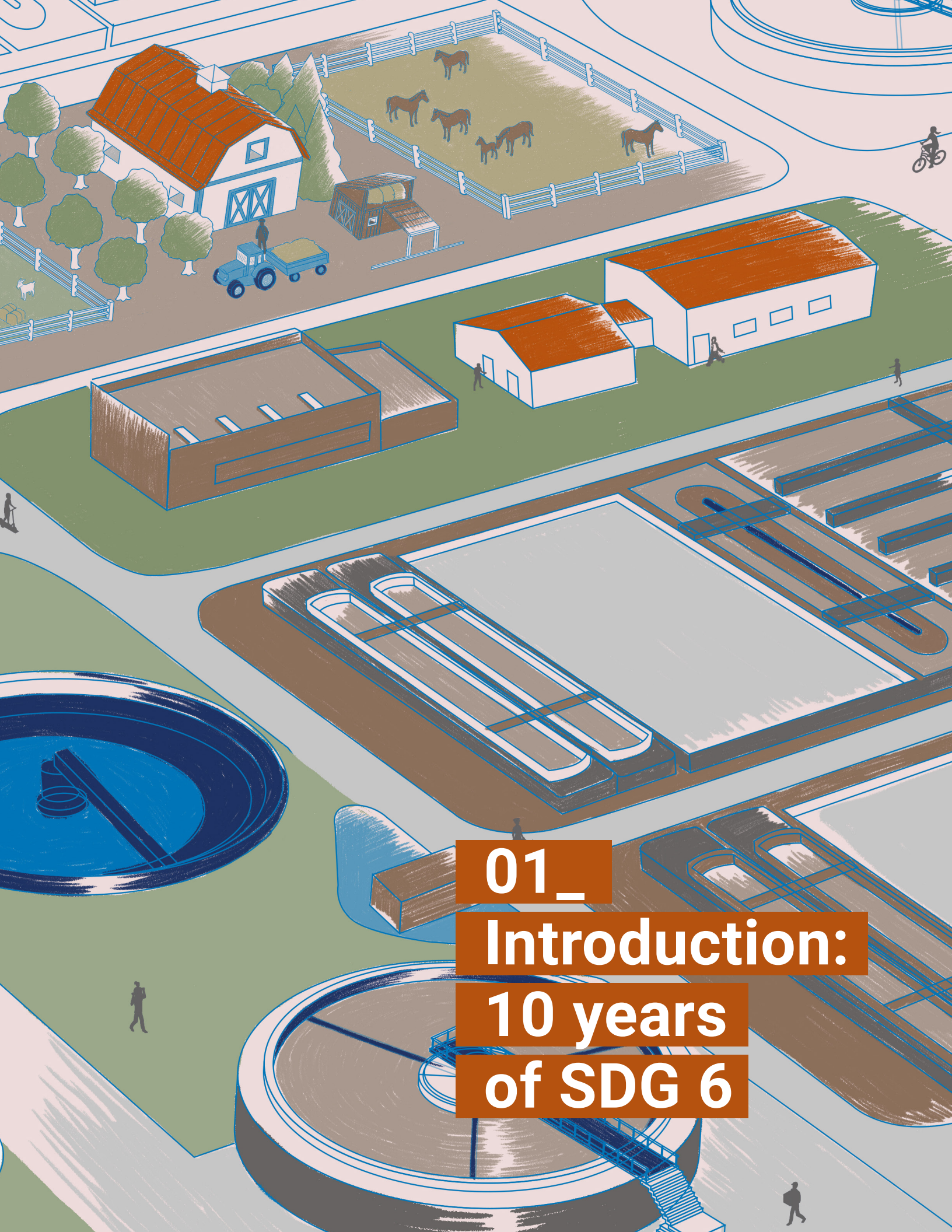
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Introduction: 10 years of SDG 6

More than 10 years ago, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) as an ambitious, universal plan of action for people, the planet and prosperity (UN, General Assembly, 2015a). At the heart of this 2030 Agenda were 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goal 6: “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” (SDG 6).

The adoption of SDG 6 marked the first time the entire water cycle – from drinking water and sanitation to water quality, efficiency, stress, management and ecosystems – was reflected in a unified, internationally agreed global framework (figure 1.1). Comprising a goal, 8 targets and 11 indicators, SDG 6 has enabled countries and actors at all levels to align policies, set targets, mobilize resources, track progress, identify gaps and act on evidence to improve water and sanitation outcomes.

A decade later, the results are visible: billions more people can access safer drinking water, sanitation and hygiene; water-use efficiency is rising; and freshwater ecosystems are being restored and protected. Countries are applying integrated water resources management to balance competing needs for people, economies and nature, and operationalizing arrangements for transboundary water cooperation.

However, taking stock of progress reveals the scope and scale of what still remains to be done to achieve SDG 6. Despite incremental gains, the world continues to face significant global water challenges.¹ Billions of people still live without safely managed drinking water and sanitation services. Water stress has reached critical levels in some regions and countries. When SDG 6 indicator values are aggregated and averaged at global

or national levels, they often mask substantial regional and local disparities, with the most vulnerable populations being disproportionately affected. The effects of climate change are felt throughout the water cycle: water demand is rising; ambient water quality is declining; and pressures on food security, energy production and water-related ecosystems (including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes) are growing.

While the scope and scale of current and future water-related challenges are unprecedented, the benefits of improving the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation are unparalleled. Global recognition of the criticality and potential of water for sustainable development, climate resilience, stability and eradication of poverty has reached a new apex. Amid a shifting multilateral landscape, there is a rising political commitment among Member States to prioritize the global water agenda. More than ever before, now is the time to keep making progress and not jeopardize gains already made.

This third edition of the UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation comes at a critical juncture. With less than five years remaining in the 2030 Agenda, the stakes have never been higher. The next few years must mark a decisive shift – from incremental improvements to transformative change.

1.1 Why this report matters now

The year 2026 is an important milestone and decisive moment for water on the multilateral agenda.

SDG 6 is under review at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. In July, the third in-depth review of SDG 6 takes place during the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council. The theme of HLPF 2026 is “Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals for a sustainable future for

¹ “Global water challenges” comprise all freshwater-related matters, including: 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 (UN, 2023a).

all”. In addition to SDG 6, the other Goals under review are SDG 7, SDG 9, SDG 11 and SDG 17. The outcomes from HLPF 2026 will contribute to the third SDG Summit in 2027, which has been mandated by the Pact for the Future to consider how to advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond (UN, General Assembly, 2024a).

Upcoming UN conferences on water in 2026 and 2028 could provide a catalytic inflection point to shift from incremental progress towards transformative change. After a gap of 46 years since the first UN Water Conference in 1977, there is a historic political opportunity with a unique sequence of three UN conferences on water taking place in 2023, 2026 and 2028. This landscape offers the potential to galvanize political leadership and commitment for SDG 6 and other internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, as well as to anchor water within the international agenda and future multilateral processes. At the end of 2026, Senegal and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will co-host the 2026 United Nations Water Conference to Accelerate the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensure Availability and Sustainable Management of Water and Sanitation for all (2026 UN Water Conference). With the 2026 conference framed as the conference of implementation and with less than five years remaining until the end of the 2030 Agenda, this is a crucial time to focus efforts and join forces to deliver on the promise of SDG 6. Subsequently, the UN General Assembly decided to convene, in 2028, the United Nations Conference on the Final Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028 (UN 2028 Water Conference), to promote the implementation of water-related actions and to take stock of the progress catalysed by the International Decade.

The end-points of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028 (Water Action Decade) and the 2030 Agenda are on the horizon. As such, discussions

are already underway that will shape the future of water in the post-2030 development agenda. While acknowledging that progress has been made through the development of the first UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation (hereafter referred to as the UN System-wide Strategy) and the appointment of the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Water, the UN 80th Anniversary Initiative (UN80) context presents new challenges and opportunities for UN system support to advancing SDG 6 implementation. In this context, water is emerging as an indicative test for whether multilateralism can deliver more coherent, visible results for people, the planet and prosperity.

Arriving at this pivotal moment, the report provides the latest evidence needed to accelerate implementation of SDG 6. Looking towards 2030 and beyond, this report also consolidates lessons learned from the implementation of SDG 6 to provide a solid foundation for the future of water and sanitation in the multilateral agenda. The coming years towards 2030 and beyond must unlock the transformative potential of water and sanitation to help put the world on a sustainable and resilient path, rise to new and emerging challenges and opportunities, and deliver a better future for people and the planet.

1.2 Purpose and structure of this report

The UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation is a flagship publication prepared by UN-Water (Members and Partners) that is strategically timed as an input for the periodic in-depth review of SDG 6 during the HLPF. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, there have been two in-depth reviews of SDG 6, in 2018 and 2023, with the third review in 2026.

The first SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation in 2018 showed the UN system “delivering as one” for SDG 6 and provided data on the global baseline status of SDG 6 (UN, 2018). In 2023, the second edition responded to the United Nations Conference for 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), providing a “blueprint” for accelerating progress towards SDG 6 and made the case for a dedicated UN system-wide water and sanitation strategy to operationalize inter-agency coordination for SDG 6 acceleration (UN, 2023a).

This third edition builds on the blueprint theme of the 2023 report. It examines the progress made after 10 years of implementation of SDG 6 and shows the tangible impacts achieved. This report also explores the changing global landscape and provides the vision of UN-Water for the remainder of the 2030 Agenda and the path beyond, towards a possible post-2030 development agenda.

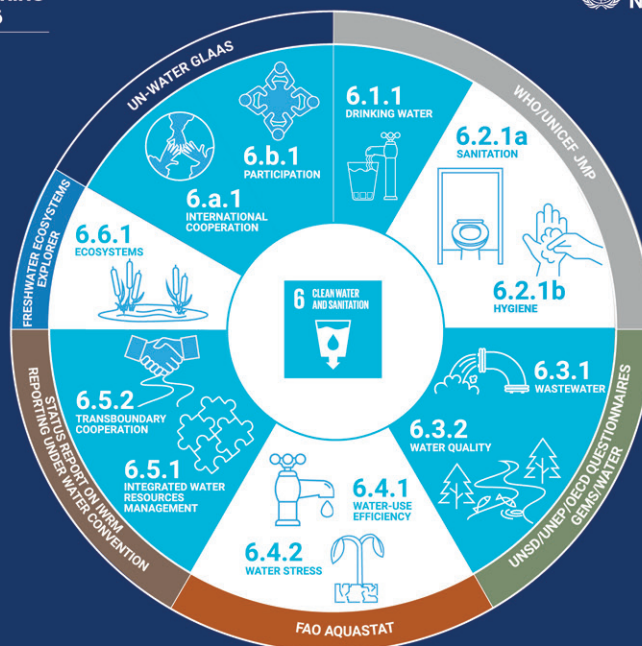
Following this introduction, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide a comprehensive review of 10 years of implementation of SDG 6 and address the following key questions:

- > What is the evidence of progress towards SDG 6 to date?
- > Are there signs of acceleration towards the achievement of SDG 6 targets?
- > How has SDG 6 affected policy development and implementation at all levels?
- > What is the value of SDG 6 to different stakeholders?

Chapter 5 presents the key findings from this review of 10 years of implementation. It also examines the changing global landscape and offers forward-looking perspectives on what remains to be done towards 2030 and beyond. It addresses the following questions:

- > What has been learned from 10 years of implementing SDG 6?
- > How can these lessons inform action in the evolving global landscape?
- > What needs to change to accelerate progress and sustain impact towards 2030 and beyond?

Chapter 6 provides the report recommendations and concluding key messages on how to strengthen a UN multilateral approach to water and sanitation towards 2030 and beyond.

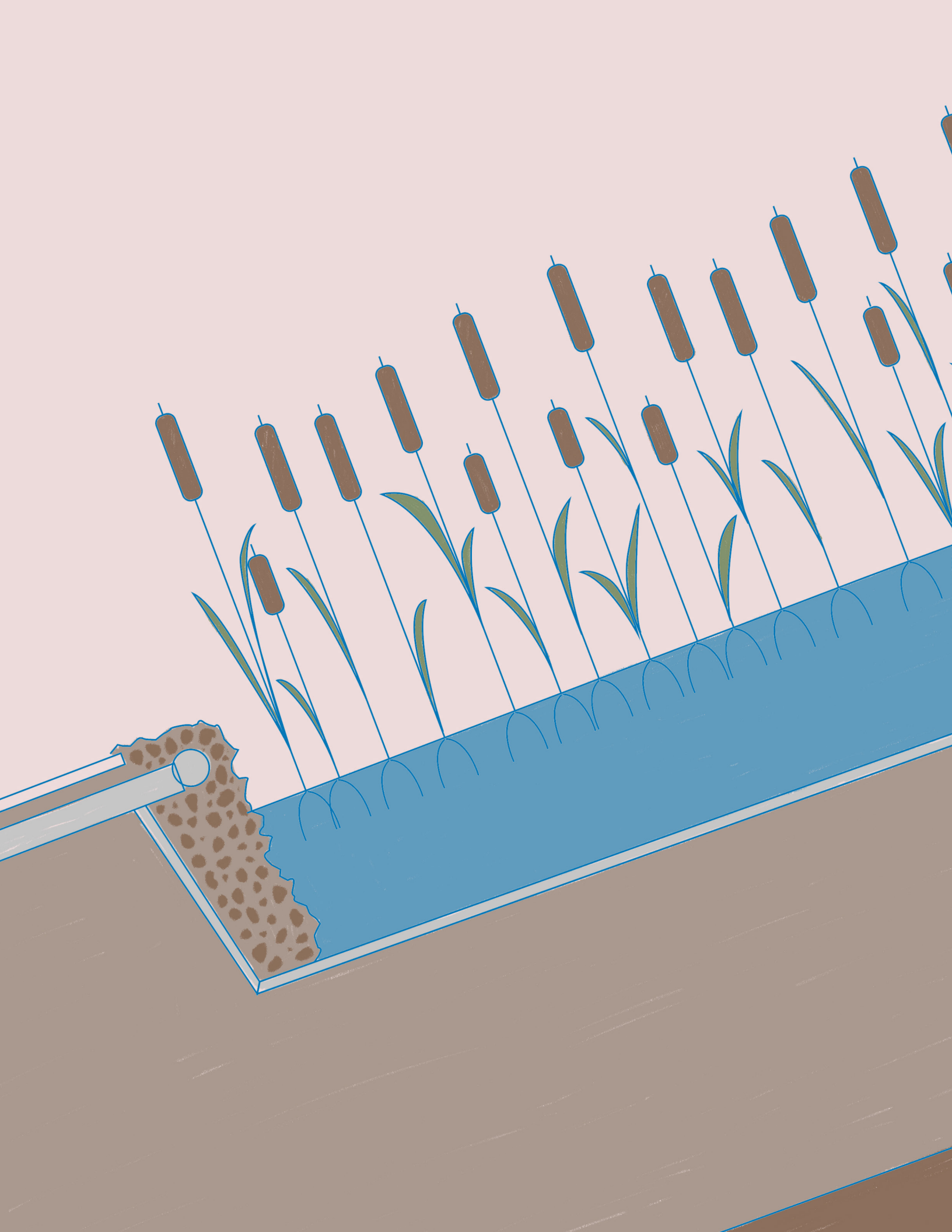


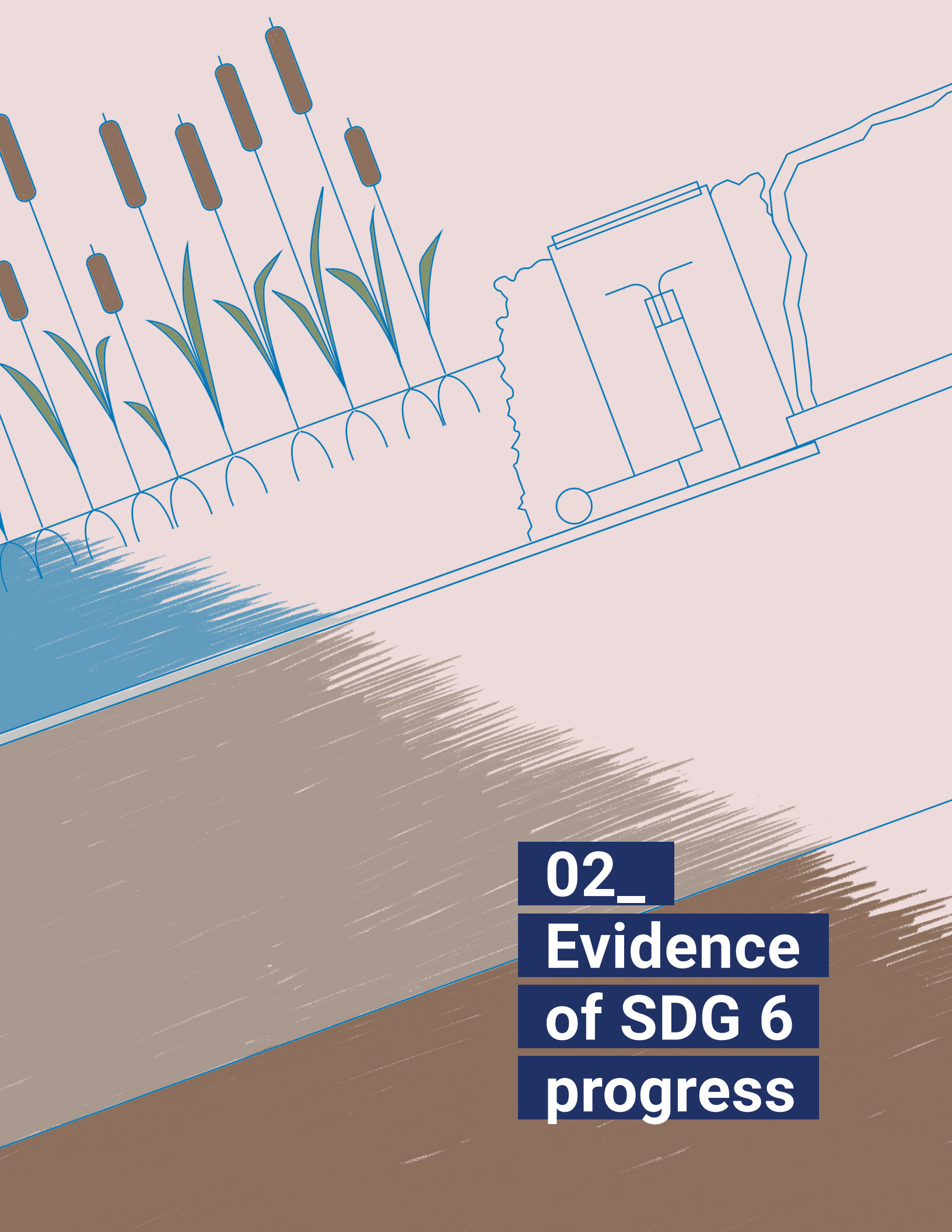
TARGETS	INDICATORS
6.1. Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.	6.1.1 Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services
6.2. Achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.	6.2.1 Proportion of population using (a) safely managed sanitation services and (b) a hand-washing facility with soap and water
6.3. Improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally.	6.3.1 Proportion of domestic and industrial wastewater flows safely treated
	6.3.2 Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality
6.4. Substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity.	6.4.1 Change in water-use efficiency over time
	6.4.2 Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources
6.5. Implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate.	6.5.1 Degree of integrated water resources management
	6.5.2 Proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation
6.6. Protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.	6.6.1 Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time
6.a. Expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies.	6.a.1 Amount of water- and sanitation-related official development assistance that is part of a government-coordinated spending plan
6.b. Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.	6.b.1 Proportion of local administrative units with established and operational policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management

Figure 1.1. SDG 6 on water and sanitation

Note: AQUASTAT = Global Information System on Water and Agriculture; FAO = Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; GEMS/Water = Global Environment Monitoring System for Water; GLAAS = Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water; JMP = Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene; OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; UNEP = United Nations Environment Programme; UNICEF = United Nations Children's Fund; UNSD = United Nations Statistics Division; Water Convention = 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes; WHO = World Health Organization.

Source: Adapted from Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023





02_

**Evidence
of SDG 6
progress**

SDG 6 has led to measurable improvements in the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for billions of people and the planet. Signs of acceleration are emerging for selected indicators in some regions and countries.

The adoption of SDG 6 established, for the first time, a comprehensive global monitoring framework covering the entire water cycle, enabling countries and the international community to systematically track progress, identify gaps and strengthen evidence-based decision-making.

Under the 2030 Agenda, UN Member States assumed responsibility for collecting and sharing indicator data and metadata for global reporting. There are 11 official global indicators to track progress towards SDG 6 (figure 1.1). Indicator-specific custodian agencies (figure 1.1) compile and validate SDG 6 country data. The custodian agencies then submit the data, together with regional and global aggregates, to the United Nations Statistics Division. To support this process, UN-Water established the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Sustainable Development Goal 6 (IMI-SDG6; UN-Water, n.d.a) in 2015, by bringing together the UN entities that are custodians of the various SDG 6 global indicators.

IMI-SDG6 supports countries in collecting, analysing and reporting SDG 6 data, while also promoting the holistic use of these data by policymakers and decision makers at all levels. IMI-SDG6 will run for the full duration of the SDG period, following four increasingly ambitious phases. Its first phase focused on developing and testing methodologies for the global indicators and creating a baseline. The second phase focused on capacity-building in countries. The current third phase places greater emphasis on the use of data at country level to inform policymaking and decision-making processes, while the fourth phase will focus on strengthening the sustainability of water and sanitation monitoring processes, improving the uptake and use of data and analytical products in decision-making processes, while preparing for the post-2030 period. Through its coordinated

inter-agency approach, IMI-SDG6 has contributed to strengthening national monitoring and reporting systems, improving methodological consistency across indicators, and increasing the availability, accessibility and policy relevance of SDG 6 data.

This chapter presents the findings on global progress towards SDG 6, drawing on the latest data and analysis produced under IMI-SDG6 by all SDG 6 custodian agencies.

2.1 Progress to date – from commitment to measurable change

A decade of action has delivered tangible gains for billions of people

At the start of the SDG period, many countries faced major gaps in water and sanitation data, as well as fragmented institutional arrangements for monitoring and reporting. By today, most have established or strengthened national monitoring systems for water and sanitation. The result is clear – quantifiable progress, as reflected in the latest data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b):

- Between 2015 and 2024, 961 million people have gained access to safely managed drinking water services (SDG indicator 6.1.1). Coverage has increased from 68% to 74%, rising quickly in rural areas (from 50% to 60%) and remaining level at 83% in urban areas. The population lacking even a basic water service has reduced from 886 million to 696 million, and 141 million fewer people rely on untreated surface water sources. In all SDG regions, safely managed water coverage is higher in urban areas but increasing faster in rural areas.
- Between 2015 and 2024, 1.2 billion people have gained access to safely managed sanitation services (indicator 6.2.1a). Coverage has increased from 48% to 58%, rising from 36% to 49% in rural areas and from 59% to 66% in urban areas. The population lacking even a basic sanitation service has decreased from 2 billion to 1.5 billion. The number of people practising open defecation has

decreased by 429 million, and it has been nearly eliminated in urban areas (<1%). Between 2015 and 2024, 1.6 billion people have gained access to basic hygiene services (handwashing facility with soap and water available on-premises, indicator 6.2.1b). Coverage has increased from 66% to 80%, rising from 52% to 71% in rural areas but remaining largely unchanged, at 86%, in urban areas. The population lacking a basic hygiene service has been reduced by one third from 2.5 billion to 1.7 billion.

- Knowledge of the total wastewater generated for all sources and how much is being safely treated is inconclusive, hindering informed decision-making in investment and policy development (indicator 6.3.1). Globally, an estimated 56% of household wastewater flows (indicator 6.3.1d) were safely treated in 2024. A global estimate of industrial wastewater flows (indicator 6.3.1i) is not feasible due to under-reporting. Nevertheless, there has been improvement in the level of reporting since the last indicator report in 2021. The volume of industrial wastewater safely treated accounted for 3 billion m³ in 2023 for the 17 reporting countries (covering 5% of the global population).
- In 2023, 56% of monitored water bodies in 120 countries were classified as having “good ambient water quality” (indicator 6.3.2). For the first time, citizen science data have been used for national SDG 6 reporting, with Earth observations helping to fill data gaps.
- Water-use efficiency (indicator 6.4.1) has improved. Global efficiency increased by 19.5% between 2015 and 2022 thanks to increasing economic growth in all sectors.
- The world average level of water stress (indicator 6.4.2) has remained almost unchanged, at approximately 18%, between 2015 and 2022. Significant regional variations exist, with some regions facing critical and persistent challenges. In regions facing critical challenges, the levels of water stress have increased.
- More countries have adopted national frameworks for integrated water resources management (IWRM) (indicator 6.5.1). Nearly 60% of countries reached at least a “medium-high” IWRM implementation level in 2023, compared to 40% in 2017. A total of 103 countries demonstrated progress (with more than a 5% increase in the degree of implementation since 2017) and 11 more have reached the global target.
- Transboundary cooperation gains remain modest (indicator 6.5.2). Despite doubling from 14% in 2017 to 28% in 2023, only 43 of 153 UN Member States sharing transboundary waters have 90% or more of these waters covered by cooperative arrangements that are operational. Between 2020 and 2023, eight countries increased their coverage of operational arrangements as a result of improved cooperation. Indicator 6.5.2 data (based on 291 river and lake basins) show countries have made important efforts to tackle climate change and reduce disaster risk at the basin level, but more work is needed. Coordinated or joint alarm systems for floods are in place for 50% of basins, and almost two thirds of basins include climate change adaptation as a task for their joint body.
- Water-related ecosystems remain under significant pressure. For the five-year observation period (2017–2021), around 90 of the 185 (i.e. ~50%) reporting countries show degradation in at least one freshwater ecosystem type (indicator 6.6.1), reflecting declining river flows, loss of surface water, or deteriorating lake water quality. This is an improvement compared to the 61% of the reporting countries in the period 2015–2019; however, significant regional differences exist. While monitoring coverage has improved, trends indicate that ecosystem protection and restoration are not yet keeping pace with pressures.
- Official development assistance (ODA) commitments to the water sector (indicator 6.a.1) increased by 6% from 2023 to 2024. In 2024, more than half of reporting countries indicated that at least 75% of external financing was aligned with national water sector plans. Notably, the share

of low-income countries reporting alignment above 75% more than doubled between 2021 and 2024, increasing from 21% to 47%.

- Most countries have defined procedures for participation in law or policy (indicator 6.b.1), and the proportion of countries with high levels of participation has increased during the SDG period.
- These outcomes reflect the catalytic power of SDG 6 monitoring. Once indicators were in place and data became available, countries could set baselines, define realistic targets and allocate resources accordingly. The act of regular measurement and monitoring fostered increased accountability and policy dialogue that have translated into tangible results.

2.2 Signs of acceleration

Progress is gaining pace in many areas – but not fast enough everywhere

The period 2020–2024 suggests a potential inflection point for parts of SDG 6. For some SDG 6 targets, recent trends indicate the rate of progress in some countries and regions has increased compared to the period 2015–2019. Cases where improvement appears to be accelerating are observed for different SDG 6 global indicators and/or subindicators. These patterns are not universal, but they signal areas where strengthened implementation and monitoring may be contributing to faster gains. Acceleration pathways differ by region. Table 2.1 provides examples of progress, drawing on the latest data reported in the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b).

Deceleration of negative trends is also considered a sign of improvement. For example, the stabilization and even slight increase in mangrove areas in some regions (subindicator of indicator 6.6.1), coupled with a general trend of less mangrove loss in the last decade, offer hope amid the ongoing challenges facing these ecosystems. The shift from predominantly large negative annual change rates in the 1990s and early 2000s to more balanced or even positive rates

indicates a potential reversal or at least a slowdown in the decline of mangrove forests in some regions. This positive development suggests conservation efforts, awareness-raising campaigns and policy interventions may be starting to yield results in certain regions.

Table 2.2 presents available trends for all SDG regions and the world. Regional and global data are aggregates based on the latest country data and can be made only if sufficient country data are available. Due to different data-collection cycles across the indicators, the year of the latest available data differs as denoted in table 2.2. Since 2015 (or 2017 where applicable), 7 of the 13 SDG 6 global indicators² show progress at the global level (6.1.1, 6.2.1a, 6.2.1b, 6.4.1, 6.5.1, 6.6.1 and 6.b.1), 4 indicators show no change (6.3.1d, 6.3.2, 6.4.2 and 6.5.2³), 1 cannot be assessed due to lack of sufficiently representative data (6.3.1i) and 1 indicator has a context-dependent interpretation (6.a.1).⁴ At the regional level, progress is observed across the majority of the global indicators in SDG regions, except in Latin America and the Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand, and Oceania. In all other regions, progress is observed in 7–10 global indicators (out of the 13), with sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia showing progress on 10 and 9 indicators, respectively. In least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and small island developing States (SIDS), progress is observed in 7, 8 and 5 SDG 6 global indicators, respectively, while the proportion of domestic wastewater flow safely treated (indicator 6.3.1d) and the proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality (indicator 6.3.2) show stagnation in all these three regional groups.

2 There are 11 official SDG 6 global indicators as endorsed by the UN General Assembly and maintained by the UN Statistics Division (UN, General Assembly, 2017). However, indicators 6.2.1 and 6.3.1 include multiple components, namely 6.2.1a (sanitation), 6.2.1b (hygiene), 6.3.1d (domestic wastewater) and 6.3.1i (industrial wastewater). These are calculated or reported separately in practice, resulting in as many as 13 distinct metrics.

3 The global average for SDG indicator 6.5.2 showed no change. However, the number of countries that have all their basin area covered by operational arrangements increased from 17 (2017), to 24 (2020), to 26 (2023).

4 Indicator 6.a.1 presents a more complex and context-dependent picture. While ODA to water and sanitation has declined in recent years, the desired long-term direction of change is not universally defined, as sustainable financing ultimately depends on increased domestic resource mobilization and reduced reliance on external aid.

Table 2.1. Examples of progress on SDG 6 global indicators per SDG region

SDG region	Examples of progress on SDG 6 global indicators
Sub-Saharan Africa	There have been notable developments in transboundary water cooperation in Africa, partly due to better availability of data, particularly concerning transboundary aquifers. This has meant 16 countries were able to report having 90% or more of their transboundary basin area covered by operational arrangements in 2023 compared to only 5 countries in 2020.
Northern Africa and Western Asia	After showing limited improvement between 2015 and 2020, water-use efficiency (indicator 6.4.1) increased by 12% in the years following 2020. This post-2020 increase signals strengthened policy focus, improved water accounting and more efficient allocation across sectors, indicating a notable shift towards more productive and efficient use of water resources.
Central and Southern Asia	Rural coverage for drinking water (indicator 6.1.1) achieved a 15 percentage points increase between 2015 and 2024. The degree of IWRM implementation (indicator 6.5.1) increased by 12 percentage points from 2020 to 2023, compared to the 6 percentage point increase in the previous period between 2017 and 2020 (i.e. twice as much). This is even more prominent in the subcomponent of “institutions and participation” where the increase more than tripled from 2020 to 2023 (from 42% in 2017, to 45% in 2020, to 56% in 2023).
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	Progress on safely managed drinking water (indicator 6.1.1) has strengthened in recent years. From 2019 to 2024, the annual rate of improvement nearly doubled compared with the period 2015–2019, indicating a clear increase in momentum relative to the earlier years of implementation.
Latin America and the Caribbean	Acceleration on water-use efficiency (indicator 6.4.1) is observed. After declining between 2015 and 2019, water-use efficiency increased by 13.5% between 2020 and 2022, returning to approximately the 2015 level. This shift from decline to recovery suggests recent investments, institutional reforms and efficiency measures are beginning to translate into measurable improvements. The agricultural waste-use efficiency increased by 22% from 2020 to 2022.
Australia and New Zealand	The proportion of household wastewater safely treated (indicator 6.3.1d) increased by 13 percentage points since 2020, reaching 87% in 2024. The trophic state of lakes (subindicator of indicator 6.6.1) has significantly improved, with a remarkable 31% decrease between 2017 and 2024 in the lakes affected.
Oceania	The percentage of countries with one or more freshwater ecosystem types in a state of degradation (indicator 6.6.1) declined by 23% between 2017 and 2024.
Europe and Northern America	The proportion of household wastewater safely treated (indicator 6.3.1d) increased by 7 percentage points since 2020, reaching 92% in 2024. Notable improvements in the trophic state of lakes (subindicator of indicator 6.6.1) are also observed, with a 15% decrease between 2017 and 2024.

Source: Data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b); analysis conducted by IMI-SDG6.

Table 2.2. Trends per SDG region and indicator

	6.1.1	6.2.1a	6.2.1b	6.3.1d	6.3.1i	6.3.2	6.4.1
	Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services (%): change 2015–2024	Proportion of population using safely managed sanitation services (%): change 2015–2024	Proportion of population with a handwashing facility with soap and water available at home (%): change 2015–2024	Proportion of domestic wastewater flow safely treated (%): change 2020–2024	Proportion of industrial wastewater flow treated (%): change 2015–2022	Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality (%): change 2017–2023	Water-use efficiency (\$/m ³): change 2015–2022
Global	+	++	++	=		=	+
Sub-Saharan Africa	+	+	+	–		+	+
Northern Africa and Western Asia	+	++	+	+		–	+
Central and Southern Asia	++	++	++	=		–	+
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	++	++		=		+	+
Latin America and the Caribbean	+	+		–		–	–
Australia and New Zealand		=		++		–	++
Oceania		+	+	=		–	+
Europe and Northern America	=	+		+		–	+
Summary progress <i>+, ++ for 8 SDG Regions:</i>	5	7	4	3		2	7
LDC	+	+	+	–		–	+
LLDCs	+	+	+	–		–	+
SIDS	+	+	++	–		–	+

6.4.2	6.5.1	6.5.2	6.6.1	6.a.1	6.b.1	
Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources (%): change 2015–2022	Degree of IWRM implementation (0–100): change 2017–2023	Proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation (%): change 2017–2023	Change in permanent surface water area (lakes and rivers) (%): change between the five-year period (2017–2021) and the baseline 2000–2019	Amount of water- and sanitation-related ODA disbursement (million 2024 \$): change 2015–2024	Proportion of countries reporting high levels of participation by users/communities for rural drinking water: change 2016–2024	
==	+	==	+	==	++	7 indicators
–	+	+	+	+	++	10 indicators
–	+	+	++	–		8 indicators
+	++		+	++	++	9 indicators
+	++	+	++	+	++	10 indicators
–	==	+	–	++	+	5 indicators
–	==	n/a	–	==		2 indicators
==	==		++	++		5 indicators
+	+	–	+	–	++	7 indicators
3	5	4	6	5	5	
==	==		+	++	+	7 indicators
+	+		+	++	–	8 indicators
==	–		++	==	==	5 indicators

Note: The trend is the change in status over time, where: (+, green) signifies a positive change (progress) with regard to the global target; (++, blue) signifies a positive change of more than 10 percentage points (significant progress); (–, red) signifies a negative change (regression); (=, grey) signifies no change; and (n/a) signifies not applicable. To indicate a trend, it is necessary to have at least two data points from two different years.

Source: Data used to calculate the trends are from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b); analysis conducted by IMI-SDG6.

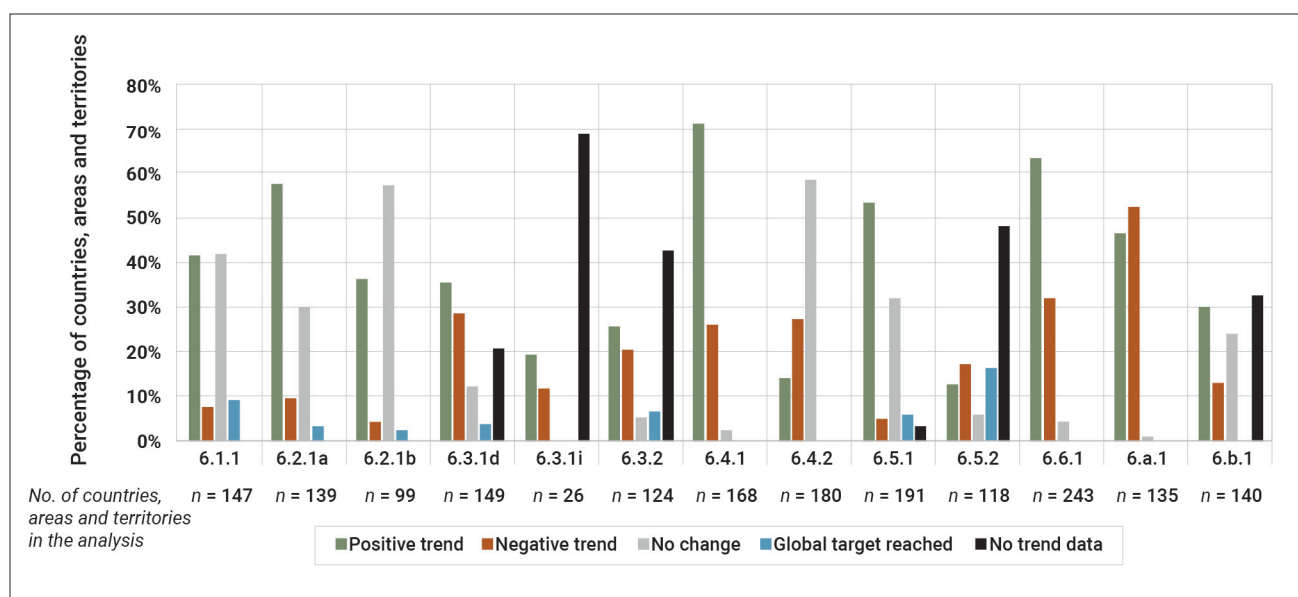


Figure 2.1. Summary statistics of trends per SDG 6 indicator across UN Member States

Note: Trends refer to the following periods: 6.1.1 (2015–2024); 6.2.1a (2015–2024); 6.2.1b (2015–2024); 6.3.1d (2020–2024); 6.3.1i (2015–2022); 6.3.2 (2017–2023); 6.4.1 (2015–2022); 6.4.2 (2015–2022); 6.5.1 (2017–2023); 6.5.2 (2017–2023); 6.6.1 (change between the period 2017–2021 and the baseline 2000–2019); 6.a.1 (2015–2024); 6.b.1 (2017–2024).

Source: Data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b); analysis conducted by IMI-SDG6.

Figure 2.1 presents summary statistics on the trends per SDG 6 global indicator across the UN Member States (due to different data-collection cycles across the indicators, the trends for each indicator refer to the periods denoted in table 2.2; in general, from 2015 or 2017 to 2022, 2023 or 2024). Progress (positive trends and/or global target achieved) is observed in the majority of the countries (in more than 60% of the reporting countries) for four indicators, namely 6.2.1a, 6.4.1, 6.5.1 and 6.6.1. For all remaining indicators, the percentage of countries progressing is higher than the percentage of countries regressing (i.e. negative trend), except for indicators 6.4.2 and 6.5.2. Indicator 6.a.1 does not have a uniform normative interpretation, as changes in its value may reflect differing country circumstances rather than progress or regression. For example, lower values may indicate reduced reliance on external assistance as domestic financing increases, while higher values may arise from instability, conflict or emergency situations, which do not constitute positive developments.⁴

Data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b) demonstrate that:

- Between 2015 and 2024, 20 countries have increased coverage of at least basic drinking water by at least 10 percentage points. The largest increases are observed in Somalia (21 percentage points), Afghanistan (20 percentage points), Lao People's Democratic Republic (19 percentage points) and Mozambique (18 percentage points).
- Individual countries are also demonstrating incremental progress on household wastewater collection, delivery and treatment. Examples include increases of about 20% in the proportion of household wastewater delivered to treatment in Azerbaijan and Peru between 2014 and 2023. Increases in the proportion of households with sewer connections (2015–2024) are also observed in Hungary, Egypt, Brazil, Qatar, China and Ecuador, ranging from 5% to 20%.
- Significant reductions in water stress and improvements in water-use efficiency have been achieved across diverse countries. Six countries with high water stress levels

(>75%) have seen a decline in stress levels between 2015 and 2022, namely Singapore (–61%), Uzbekistan (–23% from 2015 to 2022), UAE (–11%), Pakistan (–9%), Turkmenistan (–6.6%) and Bahrain (–2.5%). Singapore’s experience shows that, despite extreme scarcity, such progress is possible through long-term, integrated water management and diversification of supply, including desalination and water reuse (see section 3.4). These outcomes have been driven by strong political commitment, innovation, economic instruments such as water pricing, and a whole-of-society approach to water conservation (UN-Water, 2023a).

Country examples of rapid acceleration in the degree of implementation of IWRM (indicator 6.5.1) include Rwanda and Saudi Arabia. Over the past decade, Rwanda has significantly improved its water resources management, moving from below to well above the regional average through strong institutional coordination and integration of water resources management and drinking water, sanitation and hygiene approaches. Effective governance structures, sustained investment in capacity and data systems, strong planning frameworks and support from development partners have enabled progress. Saudi Arabia has transitioned from a period of relatively slower progress towards water and sanitation goals to a more structured and strategic approach under Saudi Vision 2030 (see section 3.5). Strong political commitment, a clear policy and institutional framework, private sector engagement, and the integration of innovation and data-driven monitoring have driven progress (UN-Water, 2025c).

Indicator 6.5.2 monitoring has inspired countries (e.g. those sharing the Senegal–Mauritania aquifer system) to work together to accelerate progress on the adoption of arrangements and joint bodies for transboundary water cooperation or operationalize existing arrangements (see section 3.5). Between 2020 and 2023, new arrangements were adopted to improve the management of Cavally River, Lake Ohrid and Prut River. Many new bilateral transboundary

water arrangements have been established, including for: Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan; Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; Azerbaijan and Georgia; Norway and Sweden; Belarus and Poland; Ecuador and Peru.

These examples, at the regional and national level, show that progress is possible at all income levels when institutions, finance and monitoring align and are supported by effective coordination mechanisms across sectors and actors.

2.3 Trajectories towards 2030 and beyond

Trajectories show partial attainment by 2030 – full realization remains within reach if progress accelerates

Modelled trajectories of SDG 6 indicators, produced by the custodian agencies by extrapolating observed trends and data patterns, provide a mixed but instructive picture: some subtargets could be met by 2030 in some regions; others would need an extended horizon to be achieved. For example, the region of Australia and New Zealand has already achieved universal access to basic drinking water services, and the Latin America and the Caribbean region is on track to achieve universal access by 2030, but the overall rate of progress will need to increase threefold to meet the global target. No SDG region is on track to achieve universal access to safely managed drinking water services – which requires water to be available on premises, free from contamination and reliably treated. Beyond 2024, the overall rate of progress will need to increase eightfold to meet the global SDG target 6.1 (figure 2.2). Similarly, despite some regions having achieved or being on track to achieve at least basic sanitation services, no SDG region is on track to achieve universal access to safely managed sanitation services by 2030, and beyond 2024, the overall rate of progress will need to increase sixfold to meet the global SDG target 6.2.1a. One SDG region (Central and Southern Asia) is on track to achieve

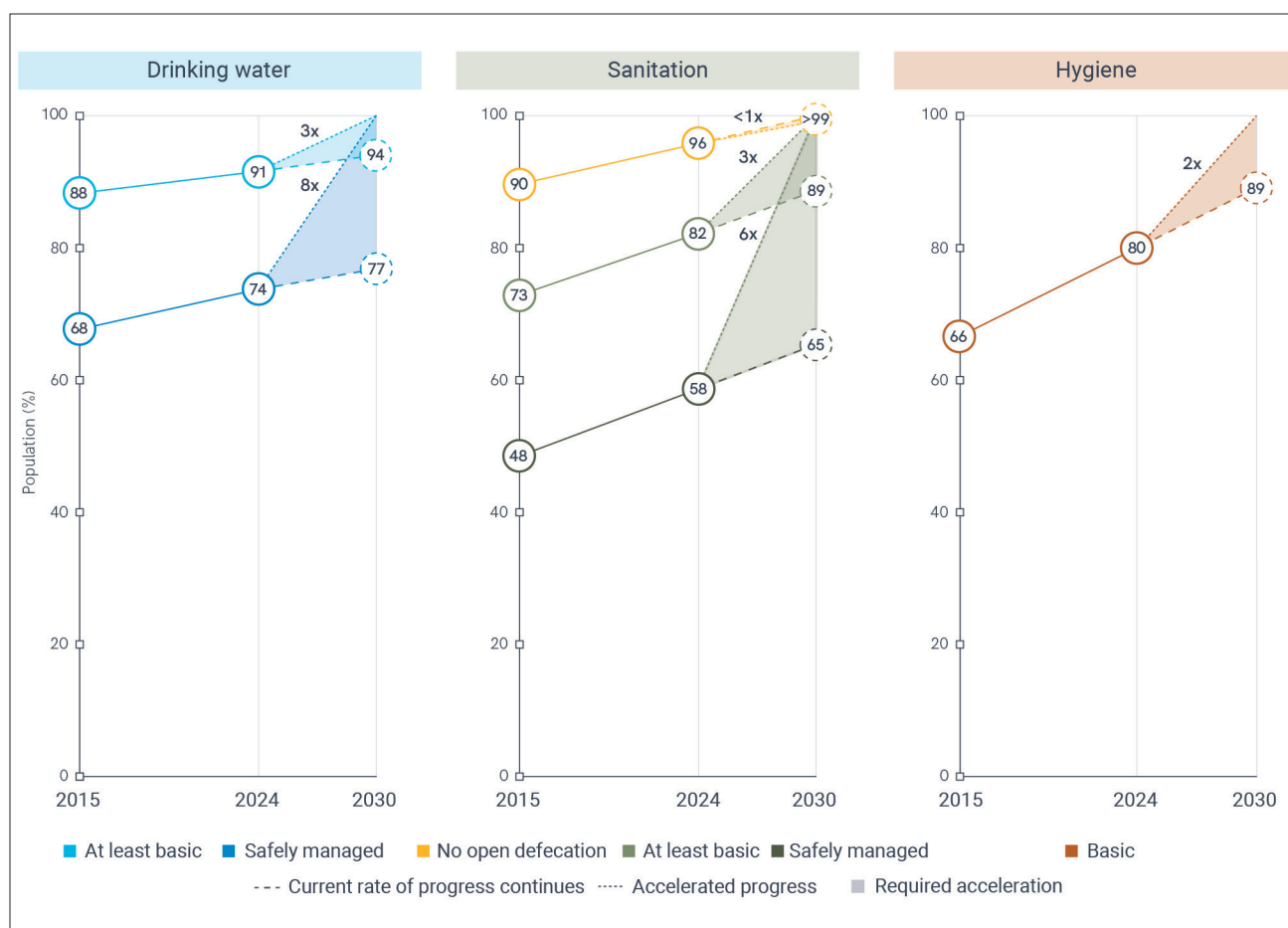


Figure 2.2. Global coverage of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services, 2015–2024 (%) and acceleration required to reach universal coverage (>99%) by 2030

Source: WHO and UNICEF (2025a)

universal access to basic hygiene services by 2030, but the overall rate of progress beyond 2024 will need to double to meet the global SDG target 6.2.1b.

While global and regional trends are generally positive for the degree of IWRM implementation, at the current rate, the world will not reach the global 6.5.1 target until at least 2049 – 23 years from now (figure 2.3). Based on the 2023 reported data, some 35% of countries are on track, or have met, the global target of “very high” IWRM implementation but need to sustain efforts. Another 41% have made some or fair progress but acceleration is needed. And 25% of countries have made limited progress. About 50% of the countries have informally set lower national targets, through the indicator 6.5.1

reporting process. Half of them do not anticipate they will reach their (lower) national targets by 2030 under “business-as-usual” progress (UNEP, 2024a).

An unprecedented effort is needed to ensure all transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers worldwide are covered by operational arrangements for cooperation. Based on the 2023 data, only 43 out of 153 UN Member States sharing transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers have operational arrangements in place for 90% or more of their transboundary basin area, and only 26 countries have all their transboundary waters covered by operational arrangements (UNECE, UNESCO and UN-Water, 2024). Unfortunately, the rate of progress is severely behind where it needs to be. At such a rate of progress, barely more than a third of

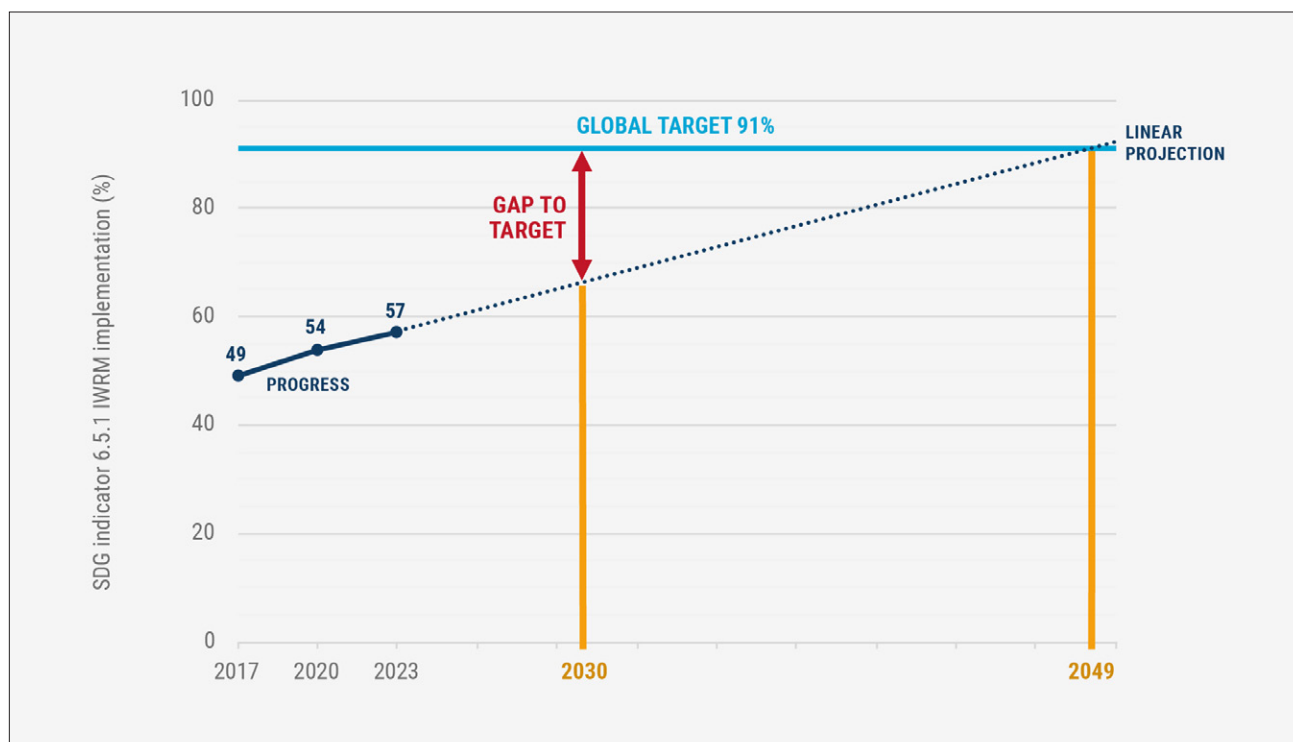


Figure 2.3. Status and projected progress of IWRM implementation (SDG indicator 6.5.1)

Source: Data based on 191 countries reporting across 2017, 2020 and 2023 (UNEP, 2024a)

countries sharing transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers would have 90% or more of their basin area covered by operational arrangements by 2030.

Extending projections to 2045–2050 suggests full realization of SDG 6 targets is achievable within the next 15-year cycle but would require a significant uptick in the pace of progress and implementation.

2.4 Areas of decline and stagnation

Stagnation in specific areas highlights the need to address persistent data, capacity and governance gaps

Progress under SDG 6 remains uneven, with several areas showing limited improvement or persistent challenges that require urgent attention. Evidence from selected indicators highlights that, while monitoring has improved and data availability has expanded, structural constraints continue to

hinder progress. These include persistent data gaps, institutional fragmentation, methodological complexities and capacity limitations – particularly in lower-income regions. In some cases, trends point to stagnation or even deterioration, underscoring the need for targeted course correction. The examples below (based on data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b) and analysis conducted by IMI-SDG6) illustrate where progress has been slow or constrained, and what lessons can be drawn to inform more effective implementation in the remaining years to 2030:

- It is still extremely challenging to readily assess industrial wastewater flows (indicator 6.3.1i). In 2023, the volume of industrial wastewater safely treated accounted for 3 billion m³ for the 17 reporting countries (covering 5% of the global population). Different challenges may explain the limited reporting of industrial wastewater flows treated, such as non-disclosure agreements to protect the confidentiality of company-specific

information. Moreover, many industries use self-supplied water resources (e.g. rivers and groundwater) that are frequently not included in the available public statistics, which tend to focus exclusively on the public drinking water network. Another issue relating to the monitoring of industrial flows is that institutional responsibility in the wastewater sector is often fragmented among different stakeholders (e.g. water operators and regulators, or ministries of water and industry) and the various data sources are not systematically centralized by a dedicated institution using a standardized methodology.

- Broad disparities on household wastewater flows safely treated (indicator 6.3.1d) continue to persist between regions, with proportions of wastewater flow safely treated ranging in 2024 from 15% to 20% in Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa up to around 90% in Europe, North America, and Australia and New Zealand. Similar trends are observed by income groups, with safe treatment of wastewater at over 90% in high-income countries, but only 26% in low-income countries. While domestic wastewater in principle includes wastewater from households and the service sector (e.g. hotels and offices), in practice, data availability is largely restricted to wastewater generated by households.
- Data gaps exist in water quality monitoring (indicator 6.3.2), particularly in North Africa and most of Asia. Many countries, especially low-income countries, lack the capacity to operate monitoring programmes that can reliably track water quality trends. Of the 2 million data records used for reporting in 2023, only around 60,000 came from the lowest-income half of the world. Lakes and groundwater bodies are monitored less than rivers and streams.
- Water stress remains critically high in several regions (indicator 6.4.2). In 2022, 13% of the countries in the world and 10% of the global population were experiencing critical or high water stress conditions. Extremely high levels of water stress were observed in Northern

Africa and Western Asia, with additional hotspots in Central and Southern Asia. Northern Africa and Western Asia subregions show worsening trends, with stress levels rising by more than 15% and 9%, respectively, from 2015 to 2022. At the same time, data gaps persist in a number of countries, particularly where information on withdrawals and environmental flows is limited, constraining comprehensive assessment and effective management. The spatial disaggregation of water stress levels is needed to capture subnational variations and enhance river basin management planning.

- More effective revenue raising for IWRM and infrastructure is needed in 85% of countries (indicator 6.5.1). In 2023, 70% of countries reported having insufficient funding to cover most of their needs for IWRM implementation at basin, aquifer or subnational levels. Developing and implementing revenue-raising and cost-recovery arrangements, including through cross-sector approaches, and ensuring these are backed by the appropriate legislative frameworks and institutional capacity to implement them, are thus essential. It is also important to make the case that investments in water management and infrastructure support other economic sectors and multiple development objectives, such as those related to food and energy security, to secure greater allocations from national budgets for implementing IWRM.
- Global coverage of operational arrangements for transboundary water cooperation (indicator 6.5.2) has expanded only modestly since 2015, although data availability and quality has improved substantially – particularly in relation to transboundary aquifers. This reflects the complexity involved in negotiating cooperative arrangements for transboundary waters, which take time to establish. Unprecedented effort is needed to meet target 6.5 and ensure all transboundary waters are covered by such arrangements by 2030. This is especially pronounced in Asia where only 2 out of

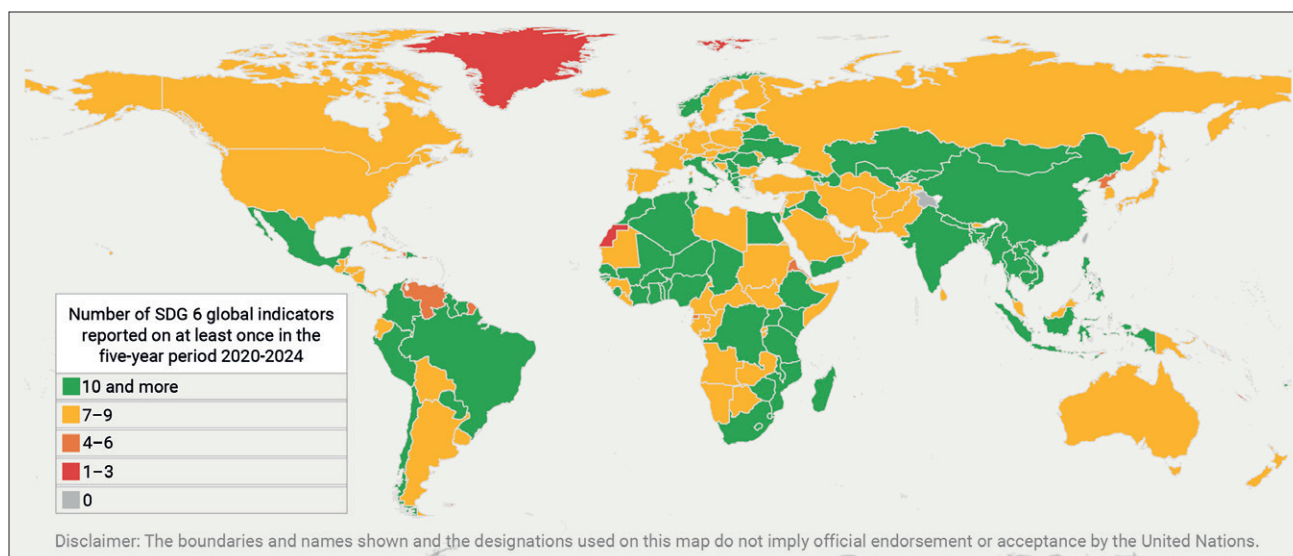


Figure 2.4. Number of SDG 6 global indicators reported on at least once during the five-year period 2020–2024

Source: Data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b), as of March 2025

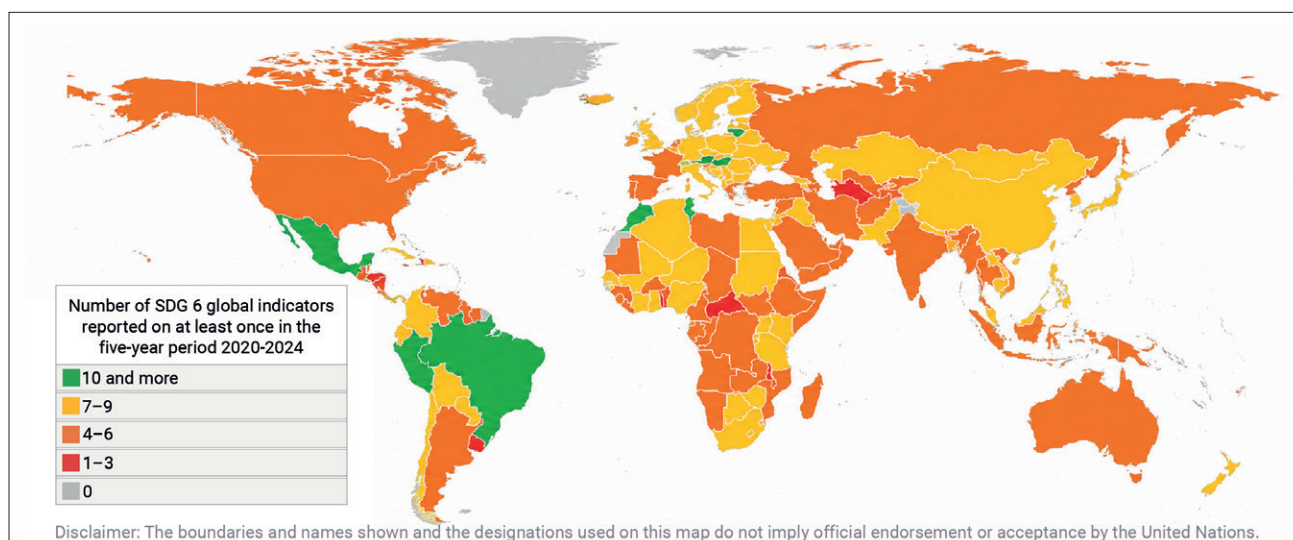


Figure 2.5. Number of SDG 6 global indicators reported on at least once during the five year period 2015–2019

Source: Data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b), as of September 2020

41 countries sharing transboundary waters had 90% or more of their transboundary basin area covered by operational arrangements in 2023, in Latin America (1 out of 22 countries) and in North Africa (one out of six countries). The main challenges identified by the countries in cooperating on transboundary waters include lack of relevant data and information, resource constraints, difficulties in data and information exchange, differences between

national administrative and legal frameworks, and sectoral fragmentation at the national level.

- In all SDG regions, the percentage of basins with negative trends in annual minimum river flow has increased (subindicator of indicator 6.6.1). The number of basins with significant decreases has reached 402 (of 12,572) – representing a fivefold increase compared to the baseline period 2000–2019.

2.5 Data coverage – monitoring as a catalyst for progress

Monitoring and reporting have become mechanisms of transformation. What began as fragmented reporting systems have evolved into an increasingly coherent global water information system. Compared to 2015–2019, the average number of countries reporting SDG 6 data in 2023–2024 has increased by approximately 60%, while the average number of indicators reported per country has grown from 5 to 8.9 out of 12.

When the global indicator framework for the SDGs was launched, only a handful of countries had the data infrastructure to report across all SDG 6 targets. By 2024, 150 Member States on average regularly submitted data for multiple indicators, supported by coordinated capacity-development efforts. This was an increase of about 61% compared to the average of the period 2015–2019. The number of countries with time series data suitable for trend analysis also increased, enabling global trend assessments for the first time. In 2024, the average UN Member State reported on 8.9 out of 12 SDG 6 global indicators, and 64% reported on 9 or more indicators (figure 2.4). This represents an important improvement over the reporting levels of the first reporting cycle in 2017 where the average UN Member State reported on only 5 out of 12 SDG 6 global indicators, and only 5.7% reported on 9 or more indicators (figure 2.5).

From 2017 to 2024, the number of countries with total estimates available for indicator 6.1.1 (safely managed drinking water) has increased by one third, from 84 to 130 (figure 2.6), and the population with data has risen from 35% to 72%. The increase in data coverage has been similar in rural and urban areas, with more than 60 countries producing new baseline estimates in rural areas and urban areas. Low-income countries have achieved the biggest increases in the number of rural, urban and total estimates since 2017, due in large part to the integration of water quality testing into household surveys.

Similar progress is observed for safely managed sanitation (indicator 6.2.1a), where country coverage increased from 80 to 136 (figure 2.6) and population coverage nearly doubled from 48% to 86%. While urban coverage remains higher (122 countries) than rural (97 countries), rural data availability has more than tripled, driven by the integration of indicators on safe management of on-site sanitation in household surveys. Low-income and lower-middle-income countries have achieved the largest increases in the number of rural, urban and total estimates for safely managed sanitation. For basic hygiene (indicator 6.2.1b), the number of countries with estimates increased by 46%, from 70 (in 2017) to 102 (in 2024) (figure 2.6), while population coverage more than doubled.

For wastewater (indicator 6.3.1), the proportion of countries reporting on safely treated household wastewater has increased steadily since 2020 (from 55% in 2020 to 61% in 2023), with estimates available for 135 countries in 2023, representing 90% of the global population. Reporting on industrial wastewater has also expanded, with the number of countries reporting nearly doubling since 2015. The ratio of industrial wastewater treated was calculated for 22 countries in 2023 (compared to 14 in 2015) (figure 2.6) and the ratio of “safely treated” industrial wastewater for 17 countries (compared to 3 in 2015). Water quality monitoring (indicator 6.3.2) has seen particularly strong growth, with the number of reporting countries increasing from 39 in 2017 to 120 in 2023.

For water-use efficiency (indicator 6.4.1) and water stress (indicator 6.4.2), data availability has reached near-global coverage (figure 2.6), reflecting strong integration of water and economic statistics in many countries. However, challenges in measuring water withdrawals and environmental flows, particularly in water-scarce and data-constrained regions, remain.

Data on IWRM implementation (indicator 6.5.1) were available for 182 countries in 2023, compared to 171 in 2017, indicating near-global coverage (figure 2.6). Reporting on transboundary water cooperation (indicator 6.5.2) has also improved, with

participation increasing from 107 countries in 2017 (just under 70% of countries sharing transboundary waters) to almost 85% in 2023 as result of increased awareness and capacity-building (figure 2.6). Ninety-three per cent of all countries sharing transboundary waters have responded to at least one data drive (2017, 2020 or 2023). Notable progress has also been made in reporting on transboundary aquifers, with data availability increasing from 65 countries in 2017 to 111 countries in 2023.

For water-related ecosystems (indicator 6.6.1), reporting has expanded steadily to near-global coverage, supported by the increasing use of Earth observations and geospatial data (figure 2.6). While initial coverage was limited, more countries are now able to monitor changes in rivers, lakes, wetlands and groundwater-dependent ecosystems, enabling more consistent global assessments over time.

For international cooperation and capacity-building (indicator 6.a.1), data availability is relatively high, with a large number of countries reporting on ODA for water and sanitation (figure 2.6). This reflects well-established tracking systems for development finance, although challenges remain in capturing the full range of

capacity-building support and its effectiveness. For local participation in water and sanitation management (indicator 6.b.1), reporting has also improved, with an increasing number of countries providing data on the presence of procedures for community engagement (figure 2.6). However, data availability remains uneven, and further efforts are needed to better capture the quality and effectiveness of participation mechanisms.

Country reporting coverage has expanded substantially across the SDG 6 framework, highlighting the rapid strengthening of national monitoring systems. The number of countries reporting across indicators has increased consistently, from approximately 95 countries on average (across the SDG 6 indicators) during the period 2015–2019, to 150 on average in the latest period 2020–2024 – this represents an increase of nearly 60%. Several indicators are now approaching near-global coverage – particularly 6.6.1 (ecosystems), 6.5.1 (IWRM), 6.4.2 (water stress) and 6.4.1 (water-use efficiency). Reporting has also grown significantly for previously under-reported areas, notably water quality and ecosystem-related indicators (6.3.2 and 6.6.1),

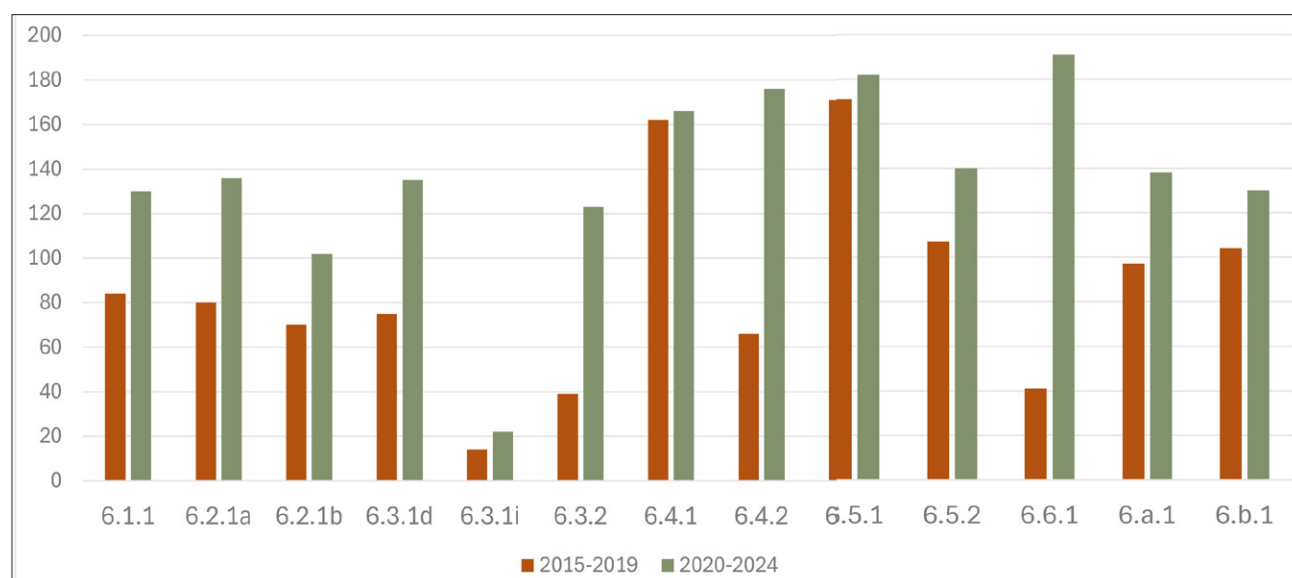


Figure 2.6. Number of UN Member States that reported on each SDG 6 indicator at least once during the five-year periods 2015–2019 and 2020–2024

Source: Data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b)

reflecting the increasing use of Earth observations and other innovative data sources, as well as indicator 6.5.2 on transboundary cooperation.

Monitoring has become more than a statistical exercise – it is now a platform for dialogue supporting evidence-based action. At the global level, joint efforts by custodian agencies have yielded harmonized methodologies, improved metadata and cross-indicator analyses. The integration of Earth observation data, open-access tools and machine-learning models is filling persistent gaps, especially for transboundary basins and ecosystem health. Global,⁵ regional and national SDG 6 platforms and focal-point networks connect ministries, statistical offices, utilities and basin authorities. These groups review data, identify policy priorities and translate findings into action. The process has strengthened coordination, enhanced transparency and built trust among diverse stakeholders. Countries allocate resources to conduct multi-stakeholder consultations to report on SDG 6.

For example, in 2023, governments in 67 countries contributed approximately \$150,000 in-kind for expenses, as well as numerous hours of staff time, towards their national multi-stakeholder consultations for indicator 6.5.1 (UNEP, 2024a). These contributions were pivotal not just for monitoring, but also for increasing shared understanding of IWRM challenges, and commitment towards improving performance. This huge mobilization effort, which brought together over 2,700 stakeholders (an average of 40 per country, with 55%/45% male/female participation), also leveraged additional financial and technical commitments. In addition, reporting triggers follow-up actions in countries. Indicator 6.5.2 monitoring has inspired countries to work together to accelerate progress on the adoption of arrangements and joint bodies for transboundary water cooperation or operationalize existing arrangements.

Countries that institutionalized SDG 6 reporting early can typically advance further. Regular monitoring encourages integration of water and sanitation into national development plans, linking evidence to prioritization, budgeting and investment; countries that measure more, can potentially achieve more. The number of countries with estimates for safely managed drinking water services (indicator 6.1.1) has doubled from 2017 to 2024 in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, and quadrupled in sub-Saharan Africa. In all the above-mentioned regions, progress towards achieving target 6.1 has also been observed (i.e. increase in percentage coverage), which may be attributed to monitoring being a driver of change.

A comparison of IWRM implementation scores (indicator 6.5.1) between countries with lower/medium reporting effort (<8 SDG 6 indicators reported) and those with higher reporting effort (≥8 indicators reported) reveals a statistically significant difference in distributions (figure 2.7). The median IWRM score is 57 for high-reporting countries compared to 43 for low-/medium-reporting countries, corresponding to a median difference of 14 points on a 0–100 scale. This consistent difference suggests that stronger monitoring and reporting systems are associated with more advanced water governance. While this relationship does not imply causation, it indicates that countries investing in data and reporting are often better positioned to plan, coordinate and implement water management policies effectively. Monitoring and implementation are mutually reinforcing: countries that measure more tend to manage better, and stronger management systems support more comprehensive reporting.

⁵ SDG 6 Data Portal, WHO/UNICEF JMP Global Database, SDG Water Quality Hub, AQUASTAT, IWRM Data Portal, Freshwater Ecosystem Explorer and GLAAS Data Portal.

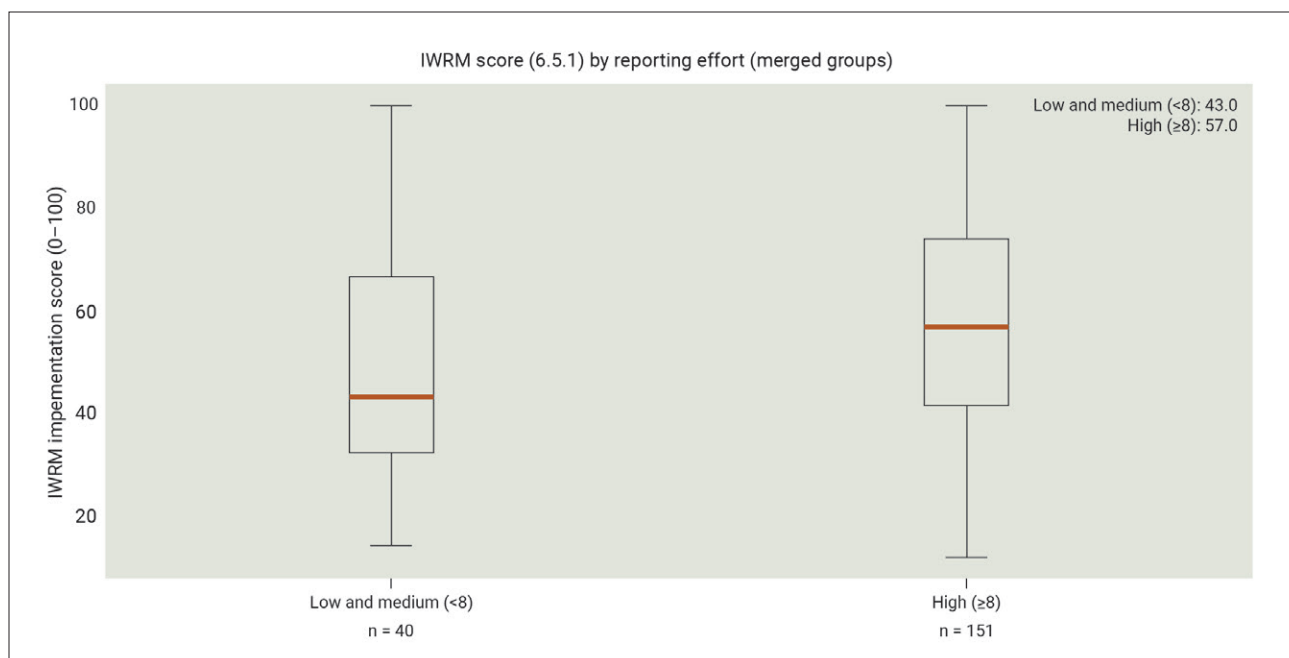


Figure 2.7. Correlation between data reporting intensity and degree of IWRM implementation (score of indicator 6.5.1)

Source: Data from the SDG 6 Data Portal (UN-Water, n.d.b), as of March 2025

2.6 Use of SDG 6 global indicator data for policy, planning and decision-making

SDG 6 data are increasingly informing decision-making, demonstrating that monitoring systems can become important drivers of policy, investment and water governance outcomes

An analysis conducted by IMI-SDG6 examined how countries are using SDG 6 data and the constraints they face in doing so. The analysis draws on targeted questions included in the 2026 Mid-term External Review of the IMI-SDG6, complemented by a dedicated study on data use. It found that 43% of monitoring focal points surveyed found SDG 6 data to be of significant value for national planning and decision-making, and 76% found it to be of at least moderate value (Hydroconseil, 2026a). While countries reported the use of data over a variety of scales and purposes, they reported that SDG 6 data are most valuable for target setting,

monitoring national strategies and strengthening interministerial coordination (figure 2.8). In particular, it was noted that (figure 2.9):

- Prime ministers' offices and ministries in charge of economic development and planning use the SDG 6 framework and data to prioritize sectors and frame policies at the national level.
- SDG 6 targets and indicators are used by countries to rebuild their water data, information and statistical system in post-conflict contexts.
- Donors regularly use the SDG framework and data to prioritize countries to support and to measure the impact of supported interventions.

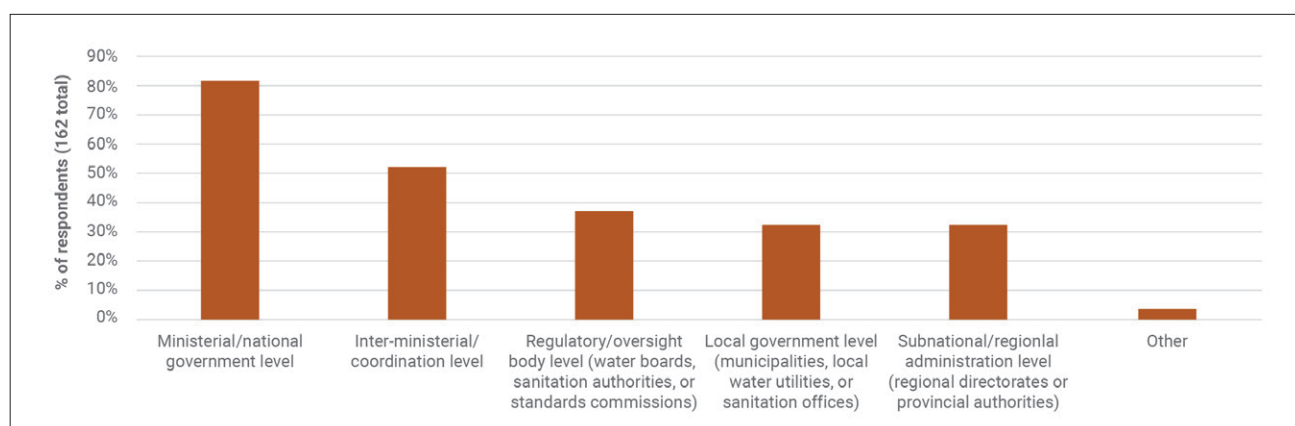


Figure 2.8. Use of SDG 6 data across administrative levels in planning and decision-making

Source: Data collected in 2026 from 162 replies to the IMI-SDG6 Mid-term Review Survey (Hydroconseil, 2026a)

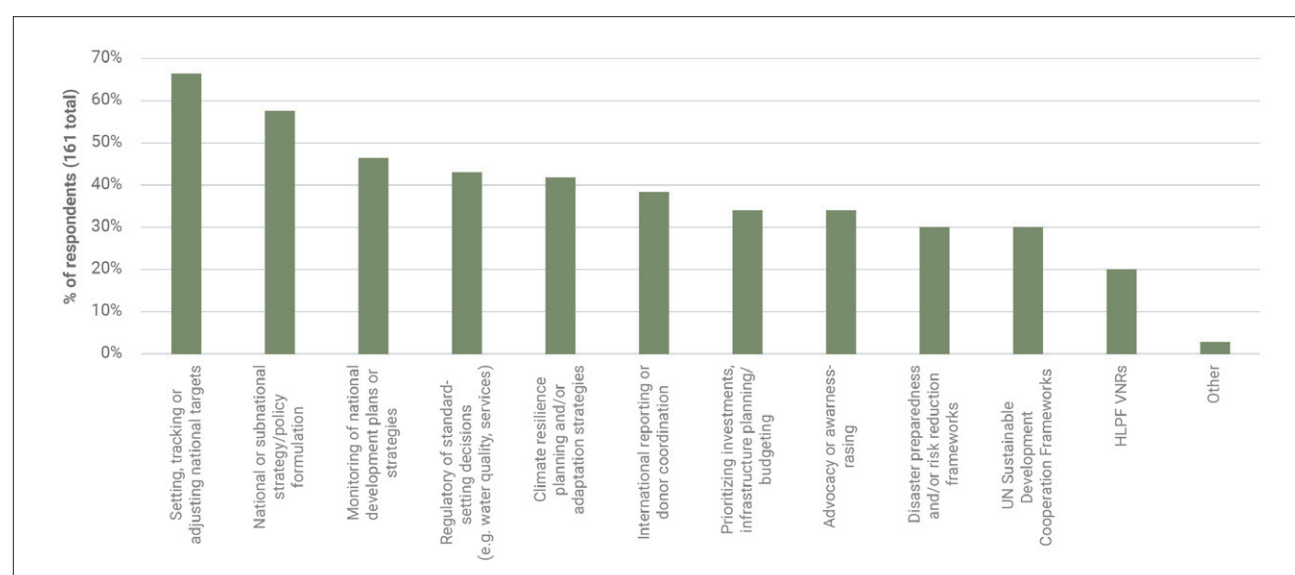


Figure 2.9. Types of use of SDG 6 data in policy, planning and decision-making

Note: VNR = voluntary national review.

Source: Data collected in 2026 from 161 replies to the IMI-SDG6 Mid-term Review Survey (Hydroconseil, 2026a)

While these findings are encouraging, the analysis also highlights limitations in the indicator framework, particularly for use beyond the national level (figure 2.9). This is largely because the primary purpose of the SDG monitoring framework was to paint a global picture supporting global comparability and aggregated reporting across countries; use of data at the country level was a secondary purpose. Based on IMI-SDG6 experience over the last 10 years, any monitoring framework that may exist post-2030 should consider the following:

- What is the purpose of the indicators? Are they intended only for global reporting or are they meant as a country-level management tool? Future indicators should be selected with fitness for purpose in mind.
- Indicators should map closely to normative targets and clearly specify the desired direction of change.
- To be fit as a country management tool, indicators must be localizable through disaggregation and contextualization.

The evidence presented in this chapter tells a clear story. SDG 6 has catalysed the most comprehensive global effort ever to measure, manage, and improve water and sanitation. Progress is real, acceleration is visible and lessons are well understood. With less than five years to 2030, the task is to accelerate progress, focus on areas lagging behind and translate data into universal delivery. Beyond global reporting, SDG 6 monitoring has helped to strengthen coordination, prioritization and evidence-based decision-making across the water and sanitation sector. Countries are increasingly using data not only to track progress, but also to inform priorities, guide investments, strengthen institutions, and coordinate policies, programmes and action across sectors and levels of governance. This experience highlights a broader progression from monitoring to impact. SDG 6 monitoring generates data, which – when translated into actionable insights – can inform decision-making, support implementation and ultimately contribute to improved water and sanitation outcomes. The value of monitoring therefore lies not only in measuring progress, but also in enabling more evidence-based and coordinated action.

Figure 2.10 illustrates how SDG 6 indicators can be translated into policy and development outcomes through a structured data-to-decision pathway. Data generated through monitoring inform key processes – including policy and legal alignment, investment planning, water governance and basin cooperation, and operational standards – enabling countries to identify gaps, prioritize actions and coordinate responses. These processes contribute to broader impacts such as stronger governance, better-targeted financing, increased resilience to water and climate risks, and improved equity in access and use of water and sanitation services.

Strengthening the role of data and monitoring in accelerating SDG 6 progress

Building on these findings, a set of targeted recommendations emerges to strengthen the role of data and monitoring in accelerating progress towards SDG 6. The following recommendations aim to consolidate the gains achieved to date, address remaining gaps, and ensure data systems continue to support effective policy and decision-making in the years to 2030 and beyond:

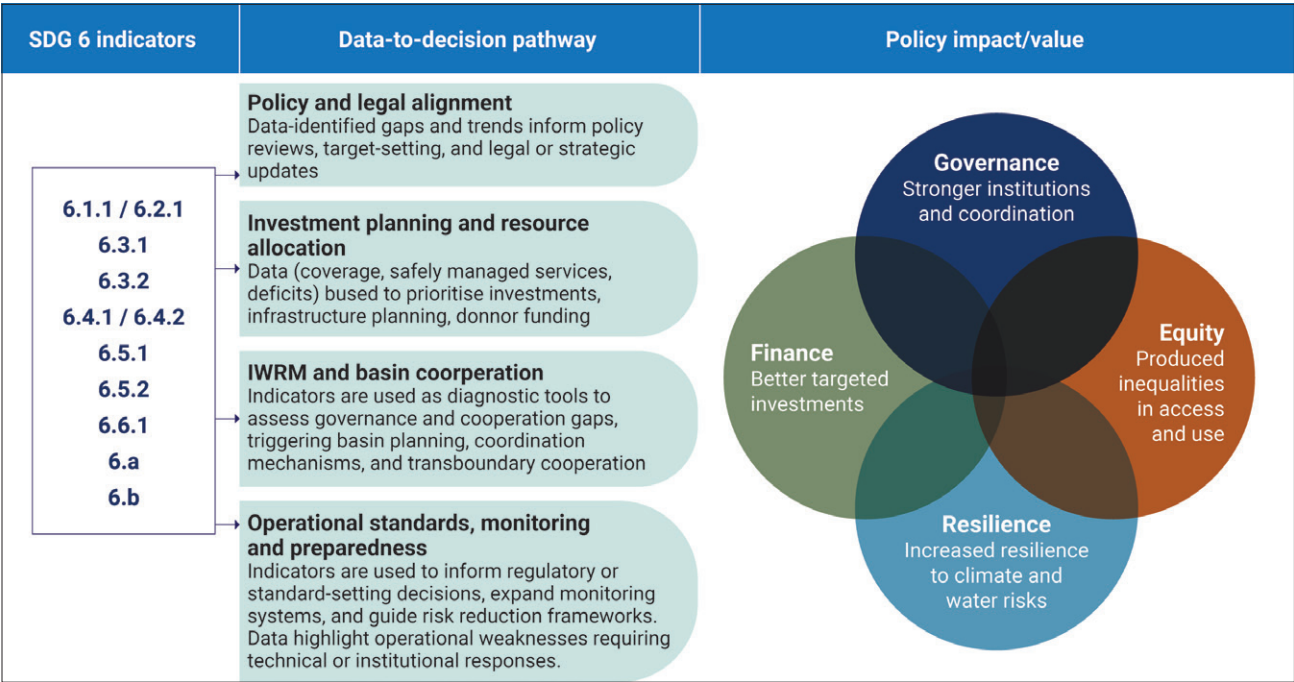
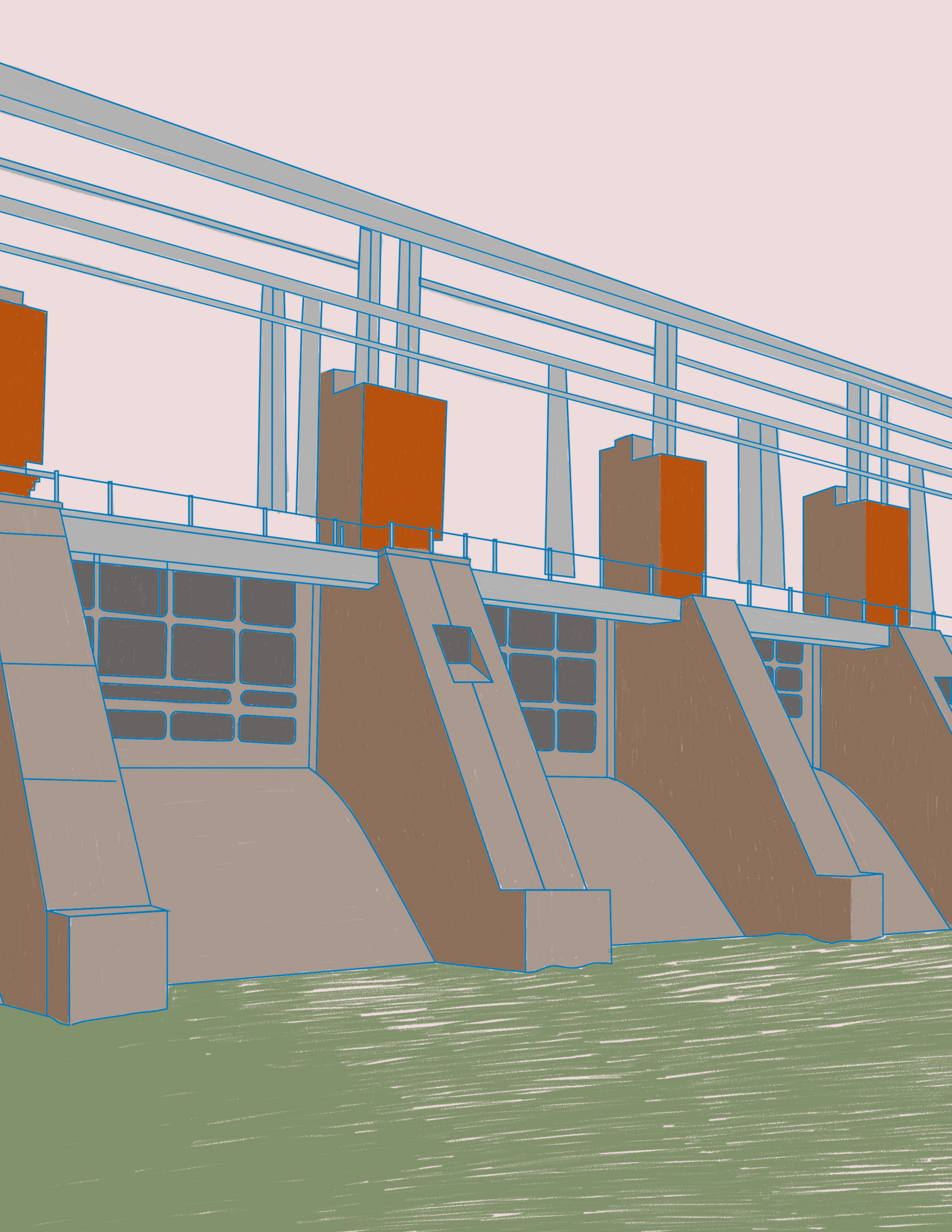


Figure 2.10. From SDG 6 data to policy impact: pathways from monitoring to decision-making

- **Monitoring can support more effective implementation.** Countries with regular, integrated reporting systems tend to show stronger coordination, planning and implementation capacity in relation to SDG 6 targets. Monitoring and implementation are mutually reinforcing: monitoring helps generate the data and evidence needed to identify gaps, prioritize actions, strengthen coordination across institutions and support more informed decision-making. At the same time, stronger management and governance systems enable more comprehensive and sustained reporting.
- **Sustain and expand global water and sanitation data infrastructure.** Building on the SDG 6 global indicators framework, countries and partners should invest in interoperable platforms, Earth observation, citizen science and shared data systems to maintain momentum, and support water and sanitation in a possible post-2030 framework.
- **Prioritize closing data gaps in high-impact and undermonitored areas to accelerate progress.** Significant gaps remain in areas that are critical for decision-making, limiting the ability to fully assess risks and target interventions. Strengthening data availability, quality and granularity – particularly at subnational and basin levels – will support more precise planning, better prioritization of investments and more effective policy responses.
- **Strengthen the use of SDG 6 data for decision-making across users and levels, and embed this principle in future frameworks.** Data should be translated into actionable insights tailored to policymakers, planners, utilities and basin authorities, ensuring relevance for planning, budgeting and regulation. This requires improved data accessibility, user-oriented products, stronger interfaces between data producers and decision makers to support uptake, and greater availability of disaggregated and contextualized data to support more targeted and equitable

policy responses. Looking ahead, any post-2030 framework should build on this by defining clear normative targets with specified directions of change, and by ensuring indicators are designed not only for monitoring, but also for their usefulness in informing national policy processes.





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Impact of SDG 6 on policy development and implementation

Building on the quantitative analysis in Chapter 2, this chapter looks “beyond the numbers” to examine how adopting the eight SDG 6 targets affects policy development and implementation – for water and sanitation, and also for other interrelated sustainable development areas. Target by target, it identifies some of the main challenges and limitations after a decade of implementation, while highlighting emerging issues on the horizon towards 2030 and beyond. Although not exhaustive, this chapter aims to show the wide-ranging impacts of SDG 6.

Additionally, this chapter highlights examples from SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Studies developed by UN-Water that explore countries’ pathways to achieving accelerated progress on SDG 6 at the national level (figure 3.1).



3.1 SDG target 6.1 – drinking water

By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all

SDG target 6.1 was a major shift from Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target 7C to “Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation”. Over the past 10 years, the implementation of target 6.1 has affected policy development and provision of drinking water services in many ways, including the following significant impacts:

Raising of the ambition to a “safely managed” service level. The introduction of the higher service level “safely managed drinking water services” added criteria derived from the UN recognized human right to safe drinking water for accessibility, availability and quality to the MDG definition of use of an improved drinking water source. The introduction of these new parameters led to a cascade of changes in policy development, implementation and monitoring systems to align with safely managed service levels.

Increased uptake in national policy and targets. In the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS)

2024/2025 country survey, 92% of responding countries reported having a policy and/or plan that addresses safely managed drinking water. In addition, most countries reported having established national targets for drinking water, while nearly two thirds reported their national drinking water target was aligned with the safely managed service level (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Establishment of standards, regulations and regulatory authorities. For drinking water, nearly 90% of GLAAS responding countries reported having standards in place for water quality and more than three quarters of countries reported having defined regulations or standards for service delivery. Most countries also reported having regulatory authorities for drinking water; however, only 24% of GLAAS responding countries reported having sufficient human resources to carry out these functions (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Drive towards professionalized service delivery and performance. Target 6.1 triggered a shift from the MDG-era focus on community management of water points through volunteerism towards professionally managed services.

Benefits beyond the numbers

Increased visibility of inequalities within and among countries. The 2030 Agenda committed to progressively reducing inequalities between and within countries and specified that SDG indicators should be disaggregated. Available national data and trends on the most common dimensions of inequality in drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services (geographic, socioeconomic and individual) are reported in the latest JMP progress report with a special focus on inequalities (WHO and UNICEF, 2025a). The higher service level also brought greater attention to inequalities within countries that have high national coverage rates, including within high-income countries. In some countries, vulnerable and marginalized populations groups have already been identified, and data for these groups are routinely collected and disaggregated in national data sources. Examples include the Roma

population within European countries, First Nations Indigenous populations in Canada, persons with disabilities in Papua New Guinea and Aboriginal populations in Australia (WHO and UNICEF, 2025a). While there has been an improvement in the availability of disaggregated data, there is not yet a systematic approach that uses these data for decision-making to address inequalities. From a human rights perspective, disaggregation is a core requirement to assess compliance with the principles of non-discrimination and equality.

Progress towards eradicating poverty and quality education (SDGs 1 and 4). Data collected for target 6.1 (and 6.2) are used to monitor and globally report on SDG 1 “no poverty” indicator 1.4.1, which tracks access to basic services, and SDG 4 “quality education” indicator 4.a.1, which monitors basic services in schools, including drinking water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. These demonstrate practical examples of the efficiencies of having interoperable indicators that can link progress on drinking water (and sanitation and hygiene) with the achievement of other SDGs.

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

Massive financing gap. Financing is a main obstacle to achieving target 6.1. A recent World Bank report estimates that countries need to increase their spending in the drinking water supply (SDG target 6.1) and sanitation (SDG target 6.2) subsectors by \$131.4–140.8 billion annually – almost tripling expenditure levels, to meet these targets (Joseph and others, 2024).

Persistent institutional, financial and service inefficiencies. Critical weaknesses in the drinking water sector constrain progress. Importantly, 30% of the global population still lacks access to piped water. For the remaining 70%, high rates of non-revenue water are causing water utilities to suffer from the huge financial costs of treating and pumping water only to see it leaking back into the ground. Despite large spending gaps in the water sector, the average annual budget execution rate was about 72% during the period 2009–2020

(Joseph and others, 2024). This means that, on average over this period, more than 28% of budget allocations remained unspent by relevant ministries. Main obstacles include lengthy and complex procurement processes, irregular funding flows and project delays (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). These constraints reduce service delivery outcomes and also weaken the ability of utilities and public institutions to attract additional financing. Improving operational efficiency, governance, revenue collection and financial transparency can strengthen the creditworthiness and investibility of water service providers, enabling greater access to domestic, climate and commercial finance.

Keeping pace with population growth and increasing urbanization. Since the start of the SDG period in 2015, the global population increased from 7.3 billion (UN, 2015) to 8.2 billion (UN, 2024a). One additional challenge that some countries face is increasing urbanization – the world’s urban population has grown from 2.9 billion in 2000 to 4.1 billion in 2015 to 4.8 billion in 2025 (UN, 2025a). This poses real challenges for municipalities and utilities to keep up with the increasing demand. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division projects that the urban population to reach 5.1 billion in 2030, and 6.5 billion in 2050 (UN, 2025a).

Climate hazards and other factors threaten progress. Floods, droughts and other extreme weather events, combined with increased conflicts, threaten not only the quality and availability of source water, but also inequalities in access to drinking water services. Increasing public concerns over emerging contaminants due to new science, increased media attention and advances in detection technologies compound these challenges. These could undermine public perception of the safety of drinking water supplies, and in some cases, may lead to consumers using alternative, less safe supplies.

Affordability. While affordability is an important consideration for all households, regardless of service level, there is no commonly agreed-upon way to measure it. The affordability component of

target 6.1 is not monitored globally due to constraints on developing a globally recognized definition and standardized measurement methodology (UNICEF and WHO, 2021). Only about one third of countries have national monitoring indicators for affordability (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). Affordability remains one of the least well-defined components of the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. Human Rights Council resolution 18/1 on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation calls upon States to “continuously monitor and regularly analyse the status of the realization of the right to safe drinking water and sanitation on the basis of the criteria of availability, quality, acceptability, accessibility and affordability”, and it refers to States’ responsibility to establish mechanisms to provide protection for poor and vulnerable populations when the costs of meeting human rights are high (UN, General Assembly, 2011).

Monitoring and improving drinking water quality.

Although many countries have established national drinking water quality standards, JMP data highlight the critical need to strengthen implementation and achievement of these standards. Drinking water quality continues to be the limiting factor for safely managed drinking water services, particularly in rural areas at 60%, underscoring the need to strengthen the management of drinking water supplies (WHO and UNICEF, 2025a). The 2025 JMP report (WHO and UNICEF, 2025a) shows that the number of countries with estimates for safely managed drinking water services has steadily increased since 2017, this growth is largely due to integration of water quality testing into household surveys, which provide a one-time measurement at a specific point in time or “snapshot data”. As a result, the proportion of the population consistently consuming water that is free of faecal contamination has likely been overestimated, reinforcing the need for more robust and routine national monitoring systems (WHO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2022).

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

Climate-resilient water supply (SDG 13). Within drinking water, sanitation and hygiene policies and plans, around half of GLAAS responding countries are already addressing the risks of climate variability and climate change (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). In 2023, at the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 28) to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Parties adopted the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience that set a target for water (9(a)), including progress towards a climate-resilient water supply to guide the achievement of the global goal on adaptation (UNFCCC, 2024, para. 9(a)). Two years later, at COP 30, Parties adopted the Belém Adaptation Indicators to assess progress under target 9(a), which are closely aligned with SDG indicator 6.1.1 (UNFCCC, 2025, Annex, paras. 3). Increasing interoperability between the monitoring processes for target 6.1 and the Belém Adaptation Indicators provides a coherent and efficient approach to incorporate water-related issues into UNFCCC processes.

Systems strengthening approach. There is increasing focus on strengthening the systems that deliver and sustain resilient drinking water services. Various diagnostic tools have been developed to support countries to assess the status of their systems. The Align to Accelerate Initiative led by WHO and UNICEF in collaboration with the World Bank is working with a multi-stakeholder group of over 40 countries and partners to develop a common monitoring and review framework comprising an agreed set of core indicators that operate together as “vital signs” to measure and track the strength of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene systems at national level (WHO, n.d.a).

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

- **There is a need for increased political leadership at the highest level**, to translate commitments into action that prioritizes universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water as

a contribution towards realization of the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.

➤ **Strengthen regulatory frameworks and enable programmes for proactive risk management and monitoring of water supplies,**

to close the gap in achieving safe drinking water supplies. Recognizing action is also needed to substantially strengthen capacities to monitor ambient water quality (see section 3.3), countries should consider increasing capacities for water quality monitoring more holistically, considering source water and drinking water.

➤ **Financial targeting should improve to close the equity gap and make more efficient use of resources.**

Investments that advance implementation of the human rights to water and sanitation approaches should be a main focus; for example, specific measures to direct financial resources to poor populations, people living in vulnerable situations and marginalized groups. This includes targeting infectious disease outbreak geographies, in particular cholera, which most commonly occurs in communities where drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services are substandard. Better tracking of finance and use of financial data can also increase the effectiveness and efficiency of spending and improve financial targeting to systematize efforts to close equity gaps and “leave no one behind” (Informal Preparatory Working Group for Interactive Dialogue Theme (a), 2026).

➤ **Strengthen inclusive systems to promote robust, sustainable and functioning water and sanitation infrastructure.**

This is the foundation to ensure sustainable delivery of safe services that are resilient to climate, conflicts, other shocks and stresses. An important element of systems strengthening is incorporating key systems indicators pertaining to the means of implementation – policies, planning, human resources, finance and equity – into national monitoring systems and public progress reports to leave no one

behind (Informal Preparatory Working Group for Interactive Dialogue Theme (a), 2026).

➤ **A shift towards the higher service standard for “access to a water supply on premises”**

reduces the burden of water fetching, which disproportionately affects women and girls. Yet in 2022, 1.8 billion people still relied on drinking water collected from supplies located off premises, and in 7 out of 10 households, women and girls were primarily responsible for water collection (UNICEF and WHO, 2023). Investing in safely managed drinking water services advances a healthier, more equitable future for all.

Figure 3.1 Countries with SDG 6 accelerated progress



This map shows the countries selected since 2022 by UN-Water for their progress on one or more SDG 6 indicators. For each country, UN-Water prepared an SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study describing the observed progress and outlining the key levers for acceleration. The case studies were prepared to share experience and promote learning among countries and are available for download on UN-Water’s website (UN-Water, n.d.c).



SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.1 – Bhutan has made one of the most remarkable accelerations on water in the world

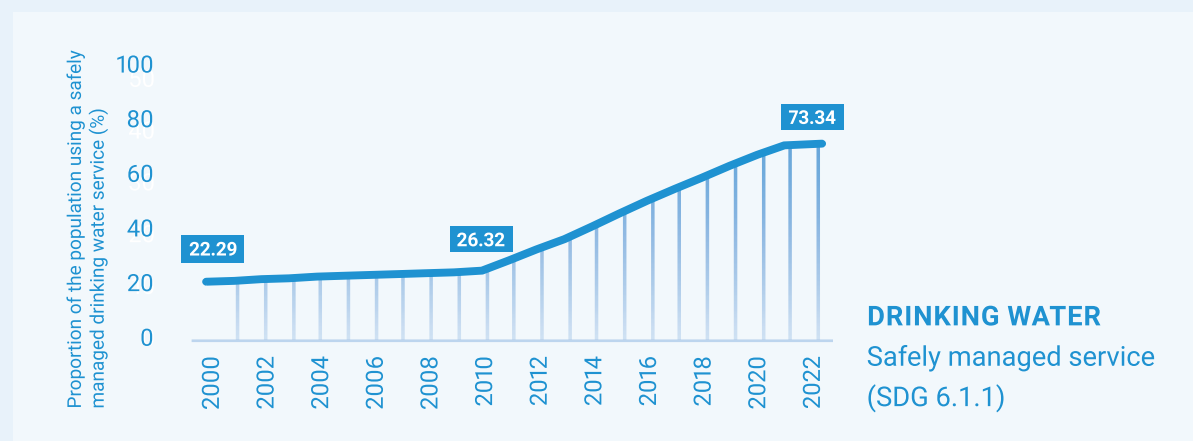


Figure 3.2. Progress on indicator 6.1.1 in Bhutan, 2000–2022

Fifteen years ago in Bhutan, three quarters of the population did not have access to safe drinking water. Today, that situation has reversed, with three in four people now having access to safe drinking water (indicator 6.1.1). In 2022, 73% of the population was using safely managed drinking water services in Bhutan, up 47 percentage points in the period since 2010, while in the previous 10 years, the same figure improved by only 4 percentage points (figure 3.2). This means that since 2010, the country has been making progress around 10 times faster than in the 2000s in terms of proportion of the population gaining access to safe drinking water. According to available data, this represents one of the most remarkable accelerations on SDG target 6.1 in the world.

Six drivers have been identified in the case of Bhutan: political prioritization, governance, financing, data and information, capacity development and youth:

- **Water is a national priority.** The Royal Government of Bhutan has been prioritizing water and sanitation for over three decades.
- **The water sector is well coordinated.** Among institutions, there is a clear division of labour, as well as a multistakeholder platform to coordinate efforts on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene.
- **The sources of financing for water supply are diversified.** They include loans, grants from development partners, government co-funding and community cost-sharing.
- **Data are used to prioritize action.** Policy and planning documents and processes use data to identify priority areas and settlements for intervention.
- **Water caretakers play a key role at the local level.** Communities hire a water caretaker paid by water users to maintain infrastructure in working condition.
- **At the height of the coronavirus disease crisis, youth volunteers were mobilized** to ensure safe and reliable drinking water for communities across Bhutan. Between 2021 and 2024, 44 water projects were completed, providing clean water to schools, irrigation systems and entire villages, thanks to youth engagement.

Source: UN-Water (2025a)



3.2 SDG target 6.2 – sanitation and hygiene



By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations

The adoption of SDG target 6.2 was a significant change from the MDG-era approach of target 7C to the SDG service level of safely managed sanitation services. The most significant impacts of target 6.2 on policy development and implementation of sanitation services and hygiene include:

Legitimacy and political commitment at highest levels. The recognition of sanitation – in relation to open defecation and the whole sanitation service chain – as well as hygiene as a stand-alone SDG target strengthened political visibility at the highest level for an issue disproportionately affecting the poorest populations. It built on the UN International Year of Sanitation in 2008 and the recognition of sanitation as a human right in 2010 (UN, General Assembly, 2010). This led to unprecedented levels of championship by political leaders, including high-profile campaigns in countries, which drove significant reduction in open defecation (WHO and UNICEF, 2025a). The response to coronavirus disease also raised awareness of hand hygiene as a global public health priority in all settings (e.g. homes, schools and health-care facilities).

Dramatic shift from toilets to safely managed sanitation services. There was a step change from focusing on use of improved sanitation facilities to the full sanitation service chain: capture, containment, emptying, transport, treatment (in situ or off-site) and final disposal or end use. The adoption of target 6.2 gave visibility and momentum to efforts under way on whole-of-sanitation service chain management by introducing the conceptual framework into SDG indicators, particularly for on-site sanitation services. It required an overhaul of national sanitation policies in many countries, as well as a re-vamp of technical standards and regulatory frameworks. It also required countries to establish

new data-collection methods and “pipelines” across levels of government to generate a baseline and regularly report on the safely managed service level.

Benefits beyond the numbers

Improved public health (SDG 3). Indicator 3.9.2 monitors the mortality rate attributed to unsafe water, unsafe sanitation and lack of hygiene. The latest WHO report estimated the burden of disease for 183 WHO Member States for the year 2019. The use of safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services could have prevented at least 1.4 million deaths in that year. This comprised 564,000 from unsafe sanitation and 384,000 from unsafe hand hygiene, covered by target 6.2 (WHO, 2023). These estimates, which cover only a subset of the measurable health impacts of improved sanitation, reinforce the evidence of greater health gains for many health outcomes associated with higher levels of service. In addition, better sanitation and hygiene in health-care facilities could contribute to maternal and newborn mortality targets (targets 3.1 and 3.2), in particular through preventing maternal and newborn sepsis.

Gender equality, sanitation and hygiene (SDG 5). Increases in sanitation facilities at the household level contribute to increased safety, privacy and dignity for women and girls. Lack of handwashing facilities disproportionately affects adolescent girls and women who are primarily responsible for childcare and domestic chores in many countries around the world (UNICEF and WHO, 2023).

Social, economic and environmental benefits (SDGs 4, 8, 12, 14 and 15). Beyond health and gender aspects, safely managed sanitation contributes to a variety of social, economic and environmental benefits including: increased school attendance, greater safety in workplaces and public places, opportunities for beneficial reuse of wastewater and nutrients, safer recreational freshwater and marine ecosystems, and increased economic opportunities through tourism.

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

The enabling environment for sanitation and hygiene. In the GLAAS 2024/2025 country survey, 88% of responding countries reported having a policy and/or plan that addresses safely managed sanitation and over half reported their national sanitation target is aligned with the safely managed service level. The percentage of countries with a national hand hygiene target was significantly lower (49%). While nearly all countries reported having minimum requirements for toilets, regulations related to faecal sludge management (71%) are less common than for sewer connections (84%), and safe disposal or reuse of faecal sludge and wastewater are least common overall (67%). Few countries reported having sufficient human resources to carry out key sanitation functions (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Climate change threatens the pace of progress. Floods, droughts and other extreme weather events are placing additional stress on already highly stretched budgets for sanitation and hygiene. This threatens backsliding on already slow progress on target 6.2 and with disproportionate impacts on health and other social and economic benefits. Resilient sanitation services offer these benefits, they can also reduce high greenhouse

gas emissions from sanitation, and they can deliver energy, nutrients and recycled water supply for other sectors, such as agriculture.

Significant challenges still face the sanitation workforce (SDG 8). In terms of worker safety, just over half of responding countries in the GLAAS 2024/2025 country survey reported having operational guidelines for worker health and safety and only around one third provide occupational health and safety training for sanitation workers. However, when it comes to sufficient equipment, less than a third of countries have measures fully in place to ensure these safety requirements, which is particularly concerning for sanitation workers. Forty-two per cent of countries indicated skilled sanitation workers do not want to live and work in rural areas and 35% reported financial constraints to pay for staff. Stigma associated with working in the sanitation subsector was identified as a severe constraint in 11% of countries (see figure 3.3) (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

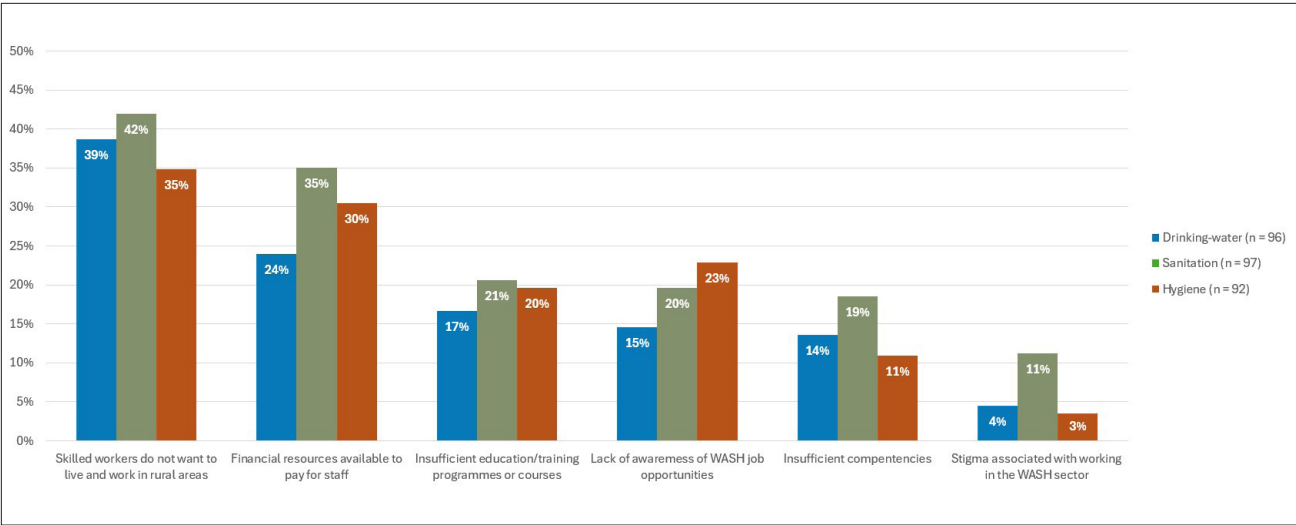


Figure 3.3. Percentage of GLAAS 2024/2025 survey responding countries identifying severe constraints to human resources
Source: WHO and UNICEF (2025b)

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

Demand-responsive sanitation and hygiene economy. Scaling up efforts to accelerate progress towards target 6.2 has triggered social business approaches and incentivized innovations to modernize on-site sanitation. These include initiatives such as the Reinvent the Toilet Challenge, Hand Hygiene for All and container-based sanitation, as well as enabling handwashing solutions that are cost effective and which can be adapted to provide solutions to special contexts to leave no one behind.

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.2 – Developing the sanitation value chain in Ghana

A demand-led approach has been implemented in urban and rural areas under the Government of Ghana and UNICEF. More than 60,000 durable household toilets have been built since 2017, using sanitation marketing. The focus is on training artisans and establishing small businesses for toilet construction, complemented by financing facilities where households and small businesses can take sanitation loans at much lower interest rates than the market and pay on flexible terms. This comprehensive approach has addressed the needs of people from different economic quintiles.

Source: UN-Water (2023b)

Climate-resilient sanitation (SDG 13). Sanitation is increasingly mainstreamed into climate policy and practice. Conversely, climate adaptation and mitigation are increasingly mainstreamed into sanitation policy and practice. The Green Climate Fund has officially launched its *Water Project Guidelines Part III: Practical Guidelines for Designing Climate-Resilient Sanitation Projects* (Green Climate Fund, 2025). The Global Methane Pledge (n.d.) reflects increasing evidence that sanitation is a significant contributor to methane emissions (5–12%). The UAE Framework for Global

Climate Resilience set a target for water that includes “climate-resilient sanitation” (UNFCCC, 2024, para. 9(a)). Subsequently, Parties have adopted the Belém Adaptation Indicators for assessing progress under target 9(a) that includes indicators closely related to SDG indicators 6.2.1a and 6.2.1b (UNFCCC, 2025, paras. 3(f), (g)).

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

- **From policy to practice, better targeting of resources is needed to close sanitation equity gaps.** The human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and the core principle of leaving no one behind are widely recognized in national constitutions, legislation and policies. However, measures to monitor progress and allocate financial resources to reach underserved groups are only partially in place. In the GLAAS 2024/2025 country survey, less than one third of responding countries reported having specific measures to direct financial resources to extend sanitation services to underserved populations and settings (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). Greater efforts are required to ensure the policy priority to reduce inequalities is systematically operationalized into plans and budget allocations, and that progress is monitored.
- **Human resources requirements for sanitation services must be filled.** To understand gaps and plan to close them, countries should conduct and use the results of human resources needs assessments in planning and budgeting, including in the health and education systems. They should also articulate protection mechanisms, including legislation and standard operating procedures, covering measures such as personal protective equipment, training, regular health checks, insurance and treatment for workers to mitigate their occupational risks across the sanitation chain (World Bank and others, 2019).
- **Integrating circular economy approaches into sanitation systems offers transformative benefits for people, the planet and prosperity.** These approaches include: extracting value

through beneficial use of energy, nutrients and water from the sanitation service chain; increasing water-use efficiency; preventing environmental degradation; and reducing and capturing greenhouse gas emissions from sanitation. They can yield significant financial benefits by increasing revenues from resource recovery and reducing operation and maintenance costs (World Bank, 2025). Circular

sanitation systems can also create new financing opportunities by linking sanitation outcomes to climate adaptation, methane reduction, nutrient recovery, energy generation and circular economy investment frameworks. Developing standardized metrics and business models for these co-benefits could help attract climate and private sector finance into sanitation systems.

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.2 – How improving hand hygiene has accelerated Pakistan’s progress towards SDG 6

Pakistan has significantly improved its hygiene and sanitation landscape through high-level political commitment, strategic national planning and local implementation. Between 2017 and 2020, access to household handwashing facilities with soap and water (indicator 6.2.1b) rose from 44% to 74% in rural areas and from 74% to 90% in urban areas. To sustain momentum, the government focused on evidence-based behavioural change communication and strengthening public–private partnerships with the country’s 600 soap manufacturers to ensure products remain affordable and accessible for all.

Key drivers of success:

- **Political leadership:** Handwashing with soap was integrated as a primary pillar of the Prime Minister’s Clean Green Pakistan Movement. This political buy-in helped to increase official development assistance for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene from \$81 million in 2010 to \$187 million in 2019.
- **Strategic national roadmap:** The Ministry of Climate Change launched the Hand Hygiene for All Roadmap, providing a country-wide framework to achieve universal hand hygiene by 2030. This guides provinces in creating costed implementation plans and robust monitoring frameworks.
- **Sustainability beyond the coronavirus disease response:** The government leveraged the pandemic response to rapidly scale up infrastructure. Over 1,400 health care facilities were rehabilitated, and more than 4,200 handwashing stations were installed in public spaces. The strategy engages over 120,000 Clean Green Pakistan Champions to promote behavioral change at the community level.
- **Experienced frontline workers:** A total of 8,696 frontline sanitary workers were trained to enhance their capacity in water supply, sanitation, hygiene and infection prevention and control in health care facilities and high-risk communities. These capable, trained and experienced frontline workers are an asset to drive the hygiene behaviour messages at the community level beyond the coronavirus disease pandemic.

Source: UN-Water (2022a)

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.2 – Translating ambitious sanitation goals into results on the ground in Cambodia

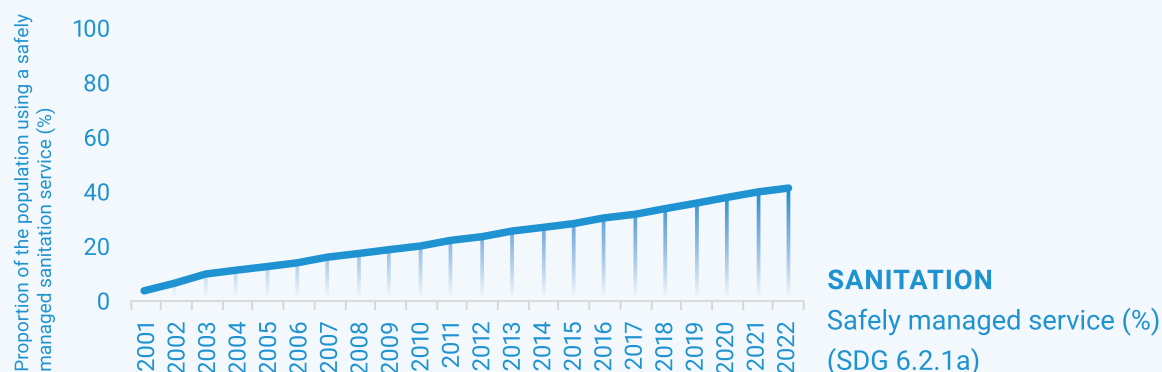


Figure 3.4. Progress on indicator 6.2.1a in Cambodia, 2001–2022

Thirty years ago, Cambodia had limited access to safe drinking water, and open defecation was prevalent. Today, the situation has improved dramatically, and the country is making progress on SDG 6. In recent years, Cambodia has managed to turn an ailing state-owned water utility into a well-managed one, doubled access to sanitation in rural areas, pulled in private investment to the water sector and made the use of piped water and sanitation more appealing to the population, including in smaller cities and rural areas. Open defecation has been eliminated in cities, and good progress is being made in rural areas. Significant progress has also been made on access to safely managed sanitation (indicator 6.2.1a), which went from 5% in 2000 to 36% in 2022 (figure 3.4). Huge progress has been made in access to basic sanitation in rural areas, doubling from 40% to around 80% in a few years. Hygiene has also made progress, gaining 20 percentage points in less than 15 years and surpassing 80% in 2021 (indicator 6.2.1b).

Five drivers have been identified in the case of Cambodia: data and information, governance, financing, capacity development and innovation. They correspond to the five global accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework:

- **Ambitious goals have been set and are pursued with determination.** In 2010, the government set the goal to achieve 100% coverage of improved water and sanitation in rural areas and achieve open defecation free status by 2025.
- **Private investment is leveraged.** The state-owned water utility of the capital city is highly profitable and raises financing from the stock exchange.
- **Technical solutions are adapted to local contexts.** Affordable, locally sourced and flood-resilient latrines play an important role in improving access to sanitation.
- **Community-led total sanitation and marketing approaches have been implemented.** These initiatives have raised awareness of the importance of sanitation and hygiene and created public demand for change.
- **Global objectives have been localized.** The UN SDG framework was transformed into the “Cambodia Sustainable Development Goals”. These are locally owned objectives, which are regularly monitored.

Source: UN-Water (2024a)



3.3 SDG target 6.3 – wastewater and water quality



By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally

Target 6.3 has successfully elevated issues related to ambient water quality, as well as wastewater treatment, recycling and safe reuse, on the international agenda. Significant impacts of target 6.3 on policy development and implementation include:

Setting the agenda for wastewater management and monitoring. Target 6.3 (indicator 6.3.1) has built awareness of some of the most critical aspects of wastewater management. It has supported countries in reporting wastewater statistics at the national level and advocated for the importance of wastewater monitoring in decision-making for investment and policy development.

Prompting the development of technical standards and methods for assessing ambient water quality. Global monitoring of indicator 6.3.2 has created an international standard methodology for assessing ambient water quality. The indicator requires countries to compare their data to water quality standards designed to protect freshwater ecosystem health. Many countries did not have such standards but instead applied standards for drinking water or wastewater effluent. A positive outcome from the indicator's implementation is that countries have started to develop new ambient water quality standards for environmental health.

Facilitating alignment of definitions and harmonization of monitoring systems. Over the past decade, UN Statistics Division, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Eurostat, and more recently, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

and WHO have made efforts to harmonize terms, definitions and methods used by their respective data instruments and monitoring efforts to collect and use countries' official national wastewater data for global reporting on indicator 6.3.1. Global reporting on indicator 6.3.2 has enabled countries to harmonize monitoring systems and align national definitions of "good" water quality.

Catalysing innovation to close data gaps.

Efforts to strengthen monitoring of ambient water quality have catalysed innovations such as using citizen science and satellite-based Earth observation for routine, ministry-led monitoring rather than being research based or academic only. Also, a new satellite-based Earth observation methodology has been developed that will now serve indicators 6.3.2 and 6.6.1, and new policy documents have been created on citizen science (WWQA, 2024), sustainable lake management (WWQA Ecosystems, 2023), groundwater monitoring (WWQA and Friends of Groundwater, 2024) and biological monitoring (WWQA Biodiversity and Biological Monitoring and Assessment, 2024).

Benefits beyond the numbers

Wastewater and health (SDG 3), climate action (SDG 13) and oceans (SDG 14). Improving wastewater management and monitoring is an essential component of SDG 6 and has synergies with all SDGs (UN-Habitat and WHO, 2024). Wastewater that has been inadequately collected and treated poses a variety of risks to human health (SDG 3). Target 3.9 aims to substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination by 2030. There are strong links between wastewater management and climate change (SDG 13), since wastewater treatment represents a high energy demand, but also acts as an important source of greenhouse gases, whereas wastewater reuse is a crucial climate change adaptation measure for reducing water stress. Addressing the discharge of inadequately treated urban and

industrial effluents through improved wastewater management can significantly protect coastal ocean biodiversity and ecosystem health (SDG 14).

Target 6.3 contributes directly to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Water quality data are needed to track progress within the Global Biodiversity Framework, now commonly known as the Biodiversity Plan. In particular, target 2 on ecosystem restoration and target 7 on reducing pollution and nutrient loss (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022) cannot be tracked unless countries have effective water quality monitoring and assessment programmes.

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

Extremely challenging to readily assess industrial wastewater flows. Only 49 countries have reported some statistics on industrial wastewater flows generated and only 27 countries reported some statistics on flows treated (UN-Habitat and WHO, 2024). In fact, many industries abstract water from (and discharge treated or untreated effluent into) water resources such as lakes, rivers and groundwater, which are frequently not monitored by public drinking water operators and are not included in national statistics. The water sector's institutional responsibility is often fragmented between a high number of actors, and industrial data are not systematically disclosed and/or centralized by a dedicated institution.

Lack of institutional and human resources capacity to monitor ambient water quality. Many countries still lack a basic monitoring capacity and find it difficult to collect data that can be used to identify long-term trends. Data management is a huge capacity gap in many countries. In 2023, over 2 million water quality measurements were taken to report on indicator 6.3.2, but the countries that represent the lowest-income half of the world contributed less than 3% of this total (60,000) (UNEP, 2024b).

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

Wastewater reuse to address the water quantity and quality crises. Investments in treatment and improved infrastructure, as well as supportive policy and legislative frameworks, can facilitate reuse. Promoting wastewater reuse for irrigation and within the industrial sector, which are the primary water consumers, could significantly reduce tensions and competition for demands on limited freshwater resources. Additionally, sludge can be reused for nutrient and energy recovery.

Expansion of citizen science work to normalize its use in national monitoring and global reporting. Citizen science has yet to realize its potential to contribute to SDG 6. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and its partners are working on multiple fronts to address this through the World Water Quality Alliance Workstream on citizen science for indicator 6.3.2 (see box 3.1). This indicator is an ideal platform for catalysing these efforts and demonstrating how participatory approaches can lead to better outcomes. The UN system and its partners are exploring the potential of citizen science across SDG 6 as part of the UN System-wide Strategy Collaborative Implementation Plan (UN-Water, 2025b).

Contribution towards monitoring the UNFCCC global goal on adaptation. Under target 9(a) of the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience, an adapted version of indicator 6.3.2 has been adopted by Parties to the UNFCCC as part of the Belém Adaptation Indicators: "Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality for drinking water supply, including as an outcome of adaptation actions where applicable" (UNFCCC, 2025, para. 3(h)).

Box 3.1. Closing data gaps as a catalyst for citizen science in Sierra Leone

The introduction of SDG Indicator 6.3.2 (ambient water quality) has had a transformative impact on water resources management in Sierra Leone. When UNEP first engaged the National Water Resources Management Agency (NWRMA) in 2017 requesting a submission on this SDG indicator, the country had no operational water quality monitoring system and no capacity to assess water quality trends. That initial engagement set in motion a chain of events of capacity development, innovation, and national ownership.

Building on support from UNEP's GEMS/Water Programme and the World Water Quality Alliance, Sierra Leone now operates routine water quality monitoring in the Rokel and Taia Pampana River Basins and has drafted its first River Basin Management Plan. Targeted capacity development has enabled NWRMA staff to achieve Master's degree level training, while the establishment of a new analytical laboratory in Freetown (funded by World Bank as part of the Food Systems Resilience Project) has expanded national analytical capability.

Sierra Leone has also emerged as a global leader in integrating citizen generated data into national monitoring systems. Being one of only two countries that have used citizen-generated data for SDG 6 reporting, with more than 70 citizen scientists being trained, contributing over 2,400 water quality measurements. Citizen scientists in Sierra Leone are collecting data on nutrients and sediment concentrations which are key measures of freshwater ecosystem health, as well as heavy metals, which are critical for managing the growing problem of artisanal gold mining in West Africa.

Led by the NWRMA, this approach has more than doubled the amount of data available and has fostered relationships with local communities. These communities who are most at risk from poor water quality are also best placed to implement protection and restoration measures, which is a vital component of water resource management. Citizen scientists are collecting robust data at high frequencies and from remote locations that would be difficult to reach using traditional monitoring approaches.

This model of combining citizen-generated with national monitoring data is now being emulated in six other African countries and the NWRMA's achievements have been nationally recognized, including collecting the National Evidence Award (awarded by the Institute for Development and SABI Salone) for their citizen science work, and are increasingly influencing global practice as more countries consider adopting this innovative approach.

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

> **Accelerate policy regulation and investment to reduce water pollution from all sectors.**

This should include: source control for industrials pollutants (e.g. limiting production of contaminating products, development and enforcement of discharge permits and extended producer responsibility), preventive measures for agricultural pollution (e.g. effluent and manure treatment, run-off management and riparian planting), increased municipal wastewater and sludge collection, treatment and beneficial reuse (for sewered and non-sewered services), and enhanced drained and

stormwater management (e.g. sewer separation, groundwater infiltration and recharge).

- > **There is still no global estimate of total and industrial wastewater flows due to under-reporting.** Consequently, many countries lack statistics on the water volumes used by economic sectors and are not adequately addressing the significant risks posed by untreated wastewater in terms of pollution, health risks, affected livelihoods and harm to ecosystems. By 2030, the health and livelihoods of 4.8 billion people could be at risk if water quality is not improved (UNEP, 2024b). Action is needed on water quality and its assessment by regular monitoring. However,

data collection and reporting on basic water quality parameters are beyond the capacity of many low- and lower-middle-income countries.

- **Credible water quality monitoring is essential for effective water management**, and even limited capacity can be effective. While monitoring alone will not solve the water quality crisis, it is an essential prerequisite for informed decision-making. Global reporting on indicator 6.3.2 has made a significant contribution to understanding

the scale of the challenge faced. As water resources come under increased pressure from climate change, increasing demand and conflicts, global monitoring of indicator 6.3.2 has made it clear that being able to answer basic questions about water quality status and trends is critical for health and sustainable development, yet this remains beyond the capacity of most low-income countries. This puts them at greater risk because the scale of impact and the urgency for action remain unknown.

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.3 – Investment in wastewater treatment has improved ambient water quality in Brazil

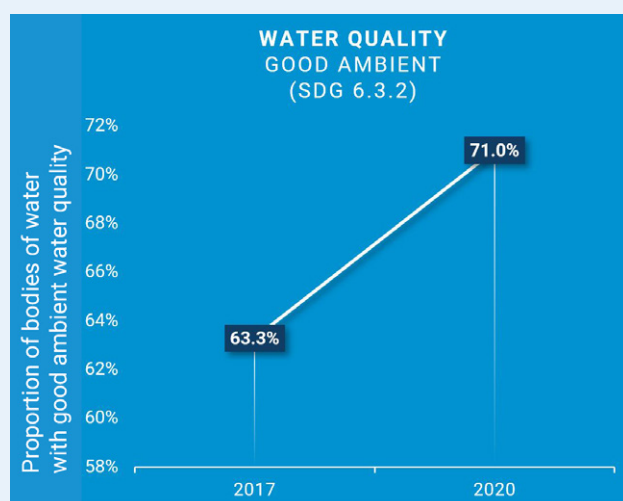


Figure 3.5. Progress on ambient water quality indicator 6.3.2 in Brazil, 2017–2020

Over 20 years, Brazil's investment in wastewater treatment has contributed to significantly improving its water quality. In the 1990s, information campaigns were conducted on the links between sanitation and the environment. In the 2000s and 2010s, large-scale federal investment was put in place, with contributions from states and other sources. As a result, 900 wastewater treatment plants were built in the period between 2013 and 2019, corresponding to a total investment of more than \$10 billion. Septic tanks also play an important role, especially in rural areas. Ambient water quality has improved (figure 3.5). Efforts are in place to sustain public funding and attract private investment for sanitation and wastewater treatment, as two thirds of municipalities still lack wastewater treatment.

Key factors and drivers that enable these achievements include:

- **Sound legal and institutional framework**, using a combination of decentralized management and centralized standards, with basin organizations and coordination platforms enabling participation at the federal, state, basin and local levels.
- **Massive federal investment** through the Growth Acceleration Program that financed wastewater treatment plants, drinking water supply systems in arid regions and hydropower plants; however, needs remain huge, with significant regional gaps.
- **Different financial tools**, with utilities in larger cities having good loan capacity, but small municipalities remaining dependent on public investment; cross-subsidies between richer and poorer communities remain limited.
- **Disaggregated data are available**, particularly by region and to some extent by gender; however, it is necessary to further disaggregate by economic status, ethnicity and sectors.
- **Projects and initiatives reflect the diversity of a large country**, tackling a variety of environmental and societal challenges, like informal housing, and specificities, such as the presence of Indigenous and Quilombola Peoples.

Source: UN-Water (2023c)



3.4 SDG target 6.4 – water-use efficiency and water stress



By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity

SDG target 6.4 built upon MDG target 7A indicator 7.5 that was used to track the “proportion of total water resources used”, while introducing a new and complementary indicator to measure water-use efficiency. This target plays a key role in the SDG 6 framework by linking the use of water by economic sectors with the availability of the resource. The adoption of target 6.4 has influenced policy development and implementation to increase water-use efficiency, ensure sustainable withdrawals and address water scarcity in several key areas:

Anchor water-reliant economic sectors firmly inside water policy dialogue. Target 6.4 is tied directly to the volumes of water used by three economic sectors: irrigated agriculture, industry and services.⁶ Globally, agriculture is emerging as the main user of water resources, accounting for 72% of total freshwater withdrawals in 2022. It is the main contributor to water stress levels at the global level, followed by the industrial sector accounting for 15% and the service sector accounting for 13% of total water withdrawals (FAO and UN-Water, 2024a).

Track water inputs to economic performance. Change in water-use efficiency over time (indicator 6.4.1) addresses the impact of economic growth on the use of water resources. It is measured as the change in the ratio of the gross economic value added generated by irrigated agriculture, industry and the services sector

relative to the volume of water used. The level of water stress (indicator 6.4.2) tracks freshwater withdrawals as a proportion of available freshwater resources, tracking the impact of water use and the availability of freshwater resources.

Incorporate environmental flows into the water stress calculation. Unlike MDG indicator 7.5, SDG indicator 6.4.2 explicitly includes the environmental flows component in computation of the indicator. While this is challenging in terms of data collection and reporting, it has focused the attention of practitioners and decision makers on the need to preserve water resources and ensure ecosystems services while planning their use for human benefits. The information is a crucial input to policymaking and water management, enabling the identification of strategies that ensure the desired socioeconomic development while reducing environmental impact (FAO, 2019).

Benefits beyond the numbers

Incentivizes innovative solutions and technologies. Countries are adopting innovative strategies and solutions to enhance water-use efficiency and reduce water withdrawals. These include demand and supply management measures, such as the modernization and rehabilitation of municipal water infrastructure to minimize water leakages, investment in more efficient “water-smart” irrigation systems and satellite-based tools to monitor and manage water in agriculture (Wired Italy, 2026), improvement of agricultural practices, or the use of non-conventional water sources such as recycling and safe reuse of treated wastewater and desalination.

Interlinkages between water stress and food security (SDG 2). The sustainable management of water resources in agriculture enhances food security and progress towards SDG 2. However, rising water stress levels can restrict the use and expansion of irrigation systems, particularly in arid and semi-arid areas where agricultural productivity relies heavily on access to irrigation (FAO and UN-Water, 2024a). Addressing these challenges is crucial for maintaining and improving agricultural

⁶ Following the UN International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC) 4 coding, sectors are defined as: (1) agriculture; forestry; fishing (ISIC A), hereinafter “agriculture”; (2) mining and quarrying; manufacturing; electricity, gas, steam and air-conditioning supply; constructions (ISIC B, C, D and F); and (3) all the service sectors (ISIC E and ISIC G-T), hereinafter “services” (DESA, 2008).

output under varying climatic conditions. If agrifood systems continue unchanged, future scenarios predict persistent food insecurity, degradation of natural resources including water and unsustainable economic growth (FAO, 2022). However, a range of policy and management options are available to tailor agrifood systems to local or regional circumstances, offering the potential for sustainable transformation (FAO and UN-Water, 2024a).

Greater visibility and global attention to water scarcity. Over the past 10 years, data from global reporting on water stress (indicator 6.4.2) have been frequently cited as an alarm bell for the global water crisis. Headlines related to water scarcity have increasingly appeared in mainstream news cycles. For example, Cape Town’s “day zero” countdown to the day when the city’s taps would run dry due to a prolonged drought and increasing water demand provided a real-life test case. This increased attention on the impacts of water scarcity has provided an entry point for broader discussions on water quality, water allocations between sectors and IWRM. It has also positively raised public awareness of the importance of water conservation, demand management and increased efficiency.

Contributes to monitoring the global goal on adaptation. Similar to previous SDG 6 targets, the two SDG indicators adopted under target 6.4 are also shared with the Belém Adaptation Indicators adopted at COP 30 under the UAE Framework for Climate Resilience target 9(a): “(a) Level of water stress, including as an outcome of adaptation actions where applicable, accounting for relevant climate hazard intensity and/or frequency” and “(b) Level of water use efficiency, including as an outcome of adaptation actions where applicable” (UNFCCC, 2025, paras. 3(a), (b)).

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

Efficiency gains – but for what benefit? While there are efforts to promote water-saving practices in agriculture, such as efficient irrigation methods and soil and water conservation, the overall impact on reducing water use may ultimately be offset by other

challenging factors driving increased water demand in agriculture such as intensification or expansion of irrigated areas (FAO and UN-Water, 2024b).

Managing trade-offs. Agriculture, as the largest user of fresh water, often operates with low water efficiency. Achieving water-use economic efficiency in agriculture entails striking a balance between increasing agricultural productivity to meet the food demands of a growing population and safeguarding water resources for future generations and ecosystem health. The trade-offs associated with enhancing water-use efficiency reach broader socioeconomic and environmental dimensions. While improvements in irrigation systems, crop genetics and agronomic practices have enhanced water-use efficiency in agriculture, other challenges, such as water pollution, land degradation and inequitable access to water, may persist, thus exacerbating the trade-offs between agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability.

Groundwater depletion as an underdiagnosed water stress driver. Aggregate water stress figures (indicator 6.4.2) frequently mask the role of groundwater mining in sustaining levels of agricultural and domestic water use in stressed regions. In contexts where surface water availability is declining, groundwater has served as a critical buffer. However, this reliance is not adequately captured in stress metrics, which focus on surface water withdrawals as a proportion of available freshwater resources. Incorporating groundwater depletion trajectories and aquifer health indicators into national water stress assessments would provide a substantially more accurate picture of structural water risk and support better-informed investment in alternative sources, demand management and conjunctive use strategies.

Data gaps remain, notably in some at-risk countries and contexts. The lack of accurate, complete and up-to-date data series in some countries remains a primary obstacle in evaluating changes in water-use efficiency and water stress. Not all countries report on all necessary variables. In addition, some fail to report annually, making it difficult to detect

changes over time. Since the first round of global reporting on indicator 6.4.2, 67 countries have not been reporting water stress data, with a significant portion of these countries being SIDS. The absence of water stress information is primarily attributed to the lack of data regarding water withdrawals across economic sectors. Particularly concerning SIDS, the absence of environmental flow requirement values is frequently observed, attributable to the limitations of the Global Environmental Flows Information System model used for estimating environmental flows in small areas (FAO and UN-Water, 2024a).

No global target values. Both indicators for target 6.4 are highly context dependent and therefore do not have global target values. A country's economic structure and the allocation of water use among the different economic sectors significantly influences water-use efficiency. In 2024, estimates of water-use efficiency ranged from below \$3/m³ in economies reliant on the agriculture sector to over \$50/m³ in highly industrialized, service-oriented economies in high-income countries (FAO and UN-Water, 2024b). Water stress measures the extent to which water resources are being exploited to fulfil the water demand within a country. Ideally, this indicator should exhibit a downward trend, showing a reduction in water stress. In absolute terms, a withdrawal rate surpassing 75% of renewable water resources represents high water stress, while exceeding 100% is considered critical water stress (FAO and UN-Water, 2024a).

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

Advance disaggregation at the basin level. Aggregating water stress values at global and regional levels masks significant disparities. Basin-level disaggregation facilitates more effective focus on places with high water stress and sectors with significant water use. In the framework of the disaggregation work, FAO in collaboration with the Stockholm Environment Institute United States of America Centre, has developed a seasonal water stress plugin for the water evaluation and planning system (Joyce and Marinelli, 2026).

The plugin allows disaggregating national annual averages of indicator 6.4.2 across spatial (basin and sub-basin) and temporal (seasonal) dimensions. The tool supports policymakers and practitioners in designing integrated water resources management strategies, including infrastructure planning and awareness-raising, contributing to more sustainable water use.

Expand monitoring of the use of non-conventional water resources solutions. The reduction of water stress is closely linked to decreasing the use of freshwater resources. Therefore, for many countries facing severe levels of water stress, a key solution is to invest in the use of non-conventional water resources. However, although the FAO Global Information System on Water and Agriculture (AQUASTAT) database collects these data, information on these resources remains limited and fragmented. In the future, greater efforts should be made to improve the monitoring of this variable, given its strong relevance to the assessment of water stress.

Strengthen linkages with gender equality (SDG 5). Target 6.4 indicators primarily focus on the economic and environmental dimensions of water use. As a consequence, there has been minimal analysis of how indicators 6.4.1 and 6.4.2 interact with gender issues. However, the human dimension is evident at target level, which aims to “substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity”. Examples of a meaningful gender contextualization of indicator 6.4.2 include the assessment of factors such as accessibility technologies and land and water tenure rights across different gender groups. To reflect social dimensions, the gender contextualization methodology was developed as part of the IMI-SDG6 work programme, and piloting is ongoing in several countries.

Understand and assess the impact of virtual water embedded in trade. According to Du and others (2022), virtual water trade has eased water stress for countries with limited water resources availability but exacerbated it for nations with

abundant water resources. However, other studies show that countries with high food insecurity rates are net virtual water exporters, while high-income countries play a major role in importing water originating from other countries that are vulnerable in terms of water availability and governance or economic wealth (Vallino and others, 2021). Although agricultural trade can offer opportunities to alleviate water stress and food insecurity, its effectiveness depends on a nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics of the context (FAO and UN-Water, 2024b). At present, virtual water trade is predominantly taking place for economic reasons, rather than to reduce water use, as water used in agriculture (the largest water user) is generally underpriced.

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

- > **Improving water-use efficiency is particularly critical in regions facing water stress,** where water availability is a limiting factor for economic growth. By optimizing water-use efficiency, protecting ecosystems and promoting equitable access to water, sustainable agriculture contributes to resilient food systems that can meet the needs of present and future generations. Greater efforts are needed to scale up best practices and innovative technologies to increase water-use efficiency and reduce water stress. For example, to adopt innovative practices to reduce water consumption, reuse treated wastewater in irrigation, enhance irrigation technologies, select adapted crops and implement strategies to minimize food waste and losses, which indirectly conserves water resources (FAO and UN-Water, 2024b).
- > **Consideration of social and equity aspects is essential when addressing issues related to water-use efficiency and water stress.** Efforts to adopt efficient technologies or improve water governance must ensure they do not disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable populations. This includes examining the accessibility of technologies or land and

water tenure rights across different gender groups (FAO and UN-Water, 2024a).

- > **Investments should be prioritized in areas facing acute water stress, climate-related hazards and other vulnerabilities.** Increased funding and support for research and innovation in water technology, such as desalination, water recycling and efficient irrigation systems, can help address water scarcity challenges. The private sector can adopt water stewardship practices and promote water sustainability by investing in technologies and solutions such as wastewater recycling systems, water-efficient products and sustainable agricultural practices (FAO and UN-Water, 2024a).

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.4 – Expanding water resources through unconventional sources in Singapore

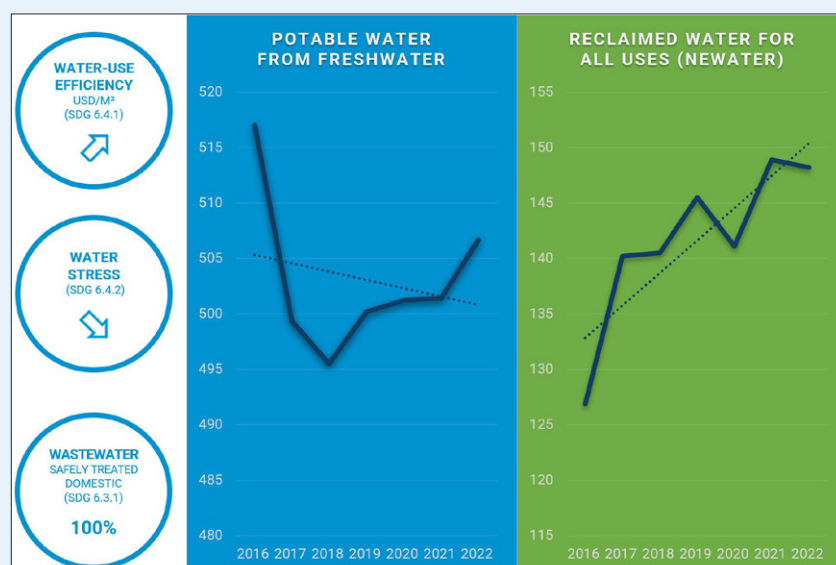


Figure 3.6. Trends in the sales (million m³) of potable water from freshwater sources and higher-quality reclaimed water (NEWater) (million m³)

sales of freshwater have gone down slightly since 2016, while the sales of NEWater have increased with 17%.

Key factors and drivers that enable these achievements include:

- **Water is high on the political agenda**, with commitment at the highest level of government; all policies must consider water security. The country sets ambitious goals and targets and plans how to achieve them, through long-term plans that are regularly updated, taking key performance indicators seriously.
- **Institutions and society are geared for learning and innovation**, starting with small pilots and then learning fast how to scale up. Singapore nurtures an innovation ecosystem that is open to the world, with solutions coming from everywhere, while protecting intellectual property rights.
- **Water-saving technical standards and water efficiency labels reduce water use**, effectively limiting the pressure from water scarcity.
- **Water is priced to reflect its scarcity value**, incorporating the higher cost of producing water from incremental sources (i.e. unconventional sources like desalination and NEWater) and allowing for the water utility to recover costs, while remaining affordable.
- **“All-of-society” awareness including public education campaigns to promote water conservation**, effectively reducing demand, coupled with standards and labels, as well as economic, legal and other instruments.
- **Financial innovation helps find cost-efficient solutions**, such as the use of public–private partnerships through water purchase agreements to lower the cost of investment in the water sector, as well as issuing bonds to finance infrastructure development. In 2022, PUB (Singapore’s National Water Agency) raised around \$600 million in inaugural green bond issuance and has in place a Medium-Term Note Programme of about \$7.5 billion.

Source: UN-Water (2023a)

In recent years, Singapore has managed to reduce water stress, despite facing extreme water scarcity. Water-use efficiency has also increased. The Singapore water story started in the 1960s, with the cleaning up of rivers allowing more rainwater to be harnessed for treatment into potable water, to then separate the used water system from drainage and effectively close the water loop. Moreover, Singapore expanded its water resources through unconventional sources, such as desalinated water and water reuse (NEWater). As reflected in figure 3.6, the



3.5 SDG target 6.5 – water management and transboundary cooperation



By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate

IWRM is the internationally recognized approach that helps to balance competing water demands from across society and the economy, without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems upon which lives and livelihoods depend. Transboundary cooperation, measured by indicator 6.5.2, contributes to sustainable water management, economic development and peace in shared river and lake basins and aquifer systems. Several significant impacts of target 6.5 on policy development and implementation include the following:

Raised political and public awareness and commitment to sustainable management of water and transboundary cooperation. Political commitments at the global level for sustainable water management and transboundary water cooperation have never been higher. In addition to the adoption of target 6.5 as part of the 2030 Agenda, IWRM lies at the heart of the Water Action Decade. The UN 2023 Water Conference⁷ called for integrated approaches to key challenges. Almost half of the nearly 850 voluntary commitments in the Water Action Agenda⁸ address target 6.5 (DESA, 2024, paras. 76, 221). At its sixth session, the United Nations Environment Assembly, in resolution 6/13, called upon Member States, specialized agencies, international organizations and relevant stakeholders to “Implement integrated water resources management at all levels” (UNEA, 2024, para. 1(a)).

⁷ The UN 2023 Water Conference served as the midterm comprehensive review of the UN Water Action Decade.

⁸ The Water Action Agenda was launched during the preparatory process for the UN 2023 Water Conference. It is a collection of all water-related voluntary commitments to accelerate progress in the second half of the Water Action Decade and second half of the 2030 Agenda (DESA, 2022).

The Transboundary Water Cooperation Coalition was launched in December 2022 as a new initiative to catalyse support to water cooperation. At the UN 2023 Water Conference, strengthening cooperation in transboundary basins, better financing of transboundary cooperation, strengthening of basin organizations and acceleration of establishment of cooperation agreements were also called for. In 2025, almost two thirds of respondents to the UNECE–UNESCO survey on the impacts of SDG indicator 6.5.2 reported that the indicator 6.5.2 reporting process raised awareness of transboundary water issues across governments (see figure 3.7).

Informed national policies, laws and plans and basin-level priority setting. Policies, laws and plans that address the integrated nature of water resources management – balancing needs and impacts across all levels of society, economy and the environment – are all critical for supporting the implementation of IWRM. Of the four main components assessed to measure the degrees of progress on IWRM,⁹ the greatest advances have been made in the enabling environment, with many countries developing, implementing and revising policies, laws and plans. Strengthening legislative frameworks, including the capacity to enforce them, is a major priority for almost 35% of countries (UNEP, 2024a). More countries now have the laws, policies, institutions and plans needed for coordinated water management than a decade ago, and new transboundary agreements have been signed and new basin management plans in shared basins developed.

Improved data availability and sharing, monitoring and review processes has been a catalyst for action. Data drives dialogue, and dialogue drives decisions. The indicator 6.5.1 monitoring process has already mobilized stakeholders and triggered new coordination mechanisms (UNEP,

⁹ Indicator 6.5.1 tracks the degree of integrated water resources management (IWRM), by assessing the four key components: enabling environment, institutions and participation, management instruments and financing.

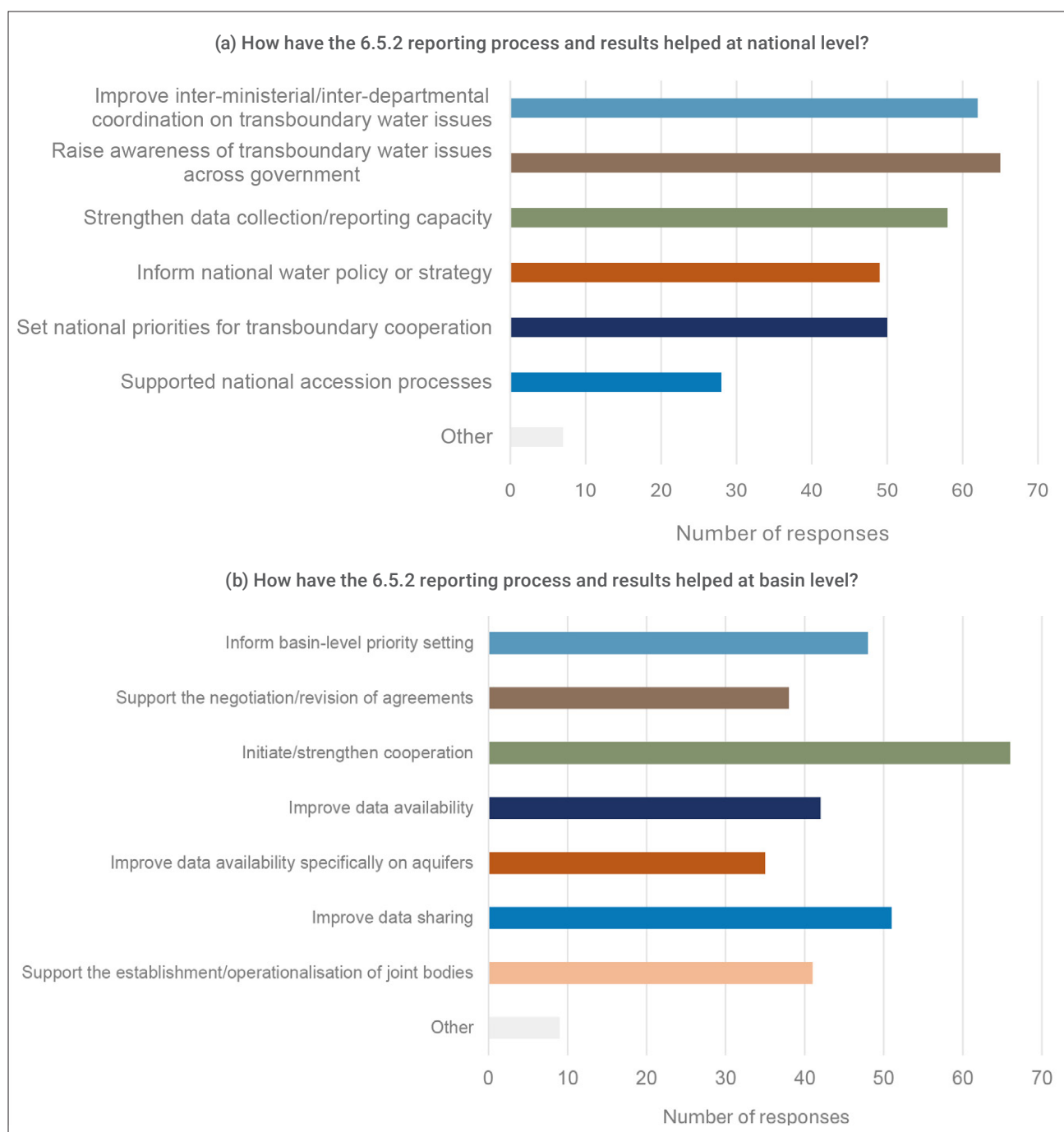


Figure 3.7. Survey on the impacts of SDG indicator 6.5.2. (103 total responses)

Source: Data from survey on the impacts of SDG indicator 6.5.2 (UNECE and UNESCO, 2025)

2024a). The global effort to produce and share data for indicator 6.5.2 has a positive outcome on transboundary water cooperation. At the country level, governments are engaging across departments to improve data quality and availability, such as engaging with national geological surveys to improve aquifer-related data. There has been

notable progress in the availability of data related to transboundary aquifers, reflecting an increased attention towards, and recognition of transboundary aquifers. Nearly half of countries reported that the indicator 6.5.2 monitoring processes has improved data sharing at basin level (see figure 3.7).

Strengthened coordination and cooperation on transboundary water management. Just over 60% of respondents to the UNECE and UNESCO survey on the impacts of SDG indicator 6.5.2 reported that the indicator 6.5.2 reporting process has improved interministerial/interdepartmental coordination on transboundary issues at the national level and approximately 64% indicated the indicator 6.5.2 reporting process has initiated and/or strengthened cooperation at the basin level (figure 3.7).

Benefits beyond the numbers

Serves as an entry point for mainstreaming water into other sector plans and multilateral frameworks. Recognizing IWRM approaches as being relevant to achieving other development objectives, including climate change adaptation, drought resilience, conservation of biodiversity, energy and food security, is critical to accelerating progress on sustainable development. Utilizing and building on existing similar frameworks such as the water–energy–food–ecosystem nexus, the source-to-sea approach, integrated land management, agrifood systems plans and integrated natural resources management can be a practical way of operationalizing IWRM and engaging on water-related issues across sectors at all levels.

Mutually reinforcing progress on climate change adaptation (SDG 13) and disaster risk reduction (SDG 11). Progress on increasing resilience to climate change is interlinked with sustainable water resources management, as showcased by countries in their national adaptation plans, where 67 out of 75 countries have defined water as a priority sector for climate change adaptation (National Adaptation Plan Global Network, 2026). The indicator 6.5.2 operability criteria (joint bodies, regular meetings, regular data exchange, and joint or coordinated plans or strategies) provide an important foundation upon which countries can jointly build resilience to climate change within transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers. Data from indicator 6.5.2 national reports provide insights into countries' efforts to tackle the impacts of climate change and disaster risk reduction at the transboundary level.

Transboundary cooperation supports multiple SDGs, such as Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17. For example, the Volta Basin Water Charter commits Volta riparian countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Togo) and the Volta Basin Authority to give special consideration to the interests and contributions of women, men and vulnerable people in decision-making about water and the environment, the rights to water and sanitation, capacity-building and investment operations, directly contributing to SDG 5 (gender equality). Implementation of jointly owned and managed projects, such as the Manantali and Diama Dams, has been recognized among the major cooperation achievements within the framework of the Senegal River Basin Development Authority directly supporting progress on SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) (UNECE, UNESCO and UN-Water, 2024).

Motivating factor to accede to UN Water Conventions. Global legal frameworks, such as the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention), the 1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses (Watercourses Convention) and the 2008 International Law Commission's draft articles on the Law of Transboundary Aquifers provide a sound basis upon which countries can develop and strengthen the implementation of arrangements for transboundary water cooperation. Indicator 6.5.2 reporting has supported national accession processes in several cases, as confirmed by 27% of respondents of the 2025 survey conducted by UNECE and UNESCO (figure 3.7). Since the start of the 2030 Agenda, 18 countries have acceded to the 1992 Water Convention and five to the Watercourses Convention.

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

Cross-sectoral coordination and collaboration. While there is broad understanding and acceptance that progress in one domain frequently supports and underpins efforts in others, fragmentation of the environmental agenda and "silo" thinking

are major barriers to achieving target 6.5. Fifty per cent of reporting countries do not have formal or effective mechanisms for cross-sector coordination (UNEP, 2024a). Among competing socioeconomic priorities, there can be challenges for ministries of water and environment to effectively lead cross-sector coordination.

Lack of financing particularly hampers the “operationalization” of sustainable water management. At the national level, the lack of funding constrains institutional capacity, monitoring networks and application of management instruments for IWRM. In terms of revenue raising, 60% of countries providing data for indicator 6.5.1 reported lacking effective revenue raising for sustainable water management (UNEP, 2024a). When it comes to allocations from national budgets, approximately 70% of countries reported they did not have sufficient funding to cover most of their needs for sustainable water management at subnational, basin or aquifer levels (UNEP, 2024a). According to indicator 6.5.2 data, at the transboundary basin level, a lack of resources was identified as a main difficulty in the operation of joint bodies or mechanisms within 40% of basins, including major transboundary river and lake basins (UNECE, UNESCO and UN-Water, 2024). Indicator 6.5.1 data also highlight the challenge countries face in financing transboundary cooperation, with only 31 countries stating they had full funding in place to finance their transboundary cooperation (UNEP, 2024a).

Insufficient institutional capacity to lead implementation of IWRM and transboundary water cooperation. Thirty-five per cent of countries reported when providing data for indicator 6.5.1 that they did not have the institutional capacity to effectively lead IWRM implementation (UNEP, 2024a). Capacity at basin, aquifer and subnational institutions levels was generally lower than at national level, yet these levels are critical to implement management instruments on the ground. In terms of capacity development, 45% of countries reported they had only ad hoc or limited capacity development for IWRM

(UNEP, 2024a). For transboundary cooperation, there were capacity and resource constraints to negotiate and implement agreements.

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

From business as usual to a step change

in progress: (a) secure political leadership commitment to implementing IWRM in countries at the highest level, from Heads of State to ministries responsible for development, planning and finance and (b) mainstream IWRM in related sectoral development goals, including those on climate, food, ecosystems and energy (UNEP, 2024a). Instead of treating water management as a stand-alone issue, mainstreaming involves recognizing water’s integral role in other sectors. This will lead to more efficient and sustainable use of water resources, improved resilience to water-related challenges and better coordination among sectors for managing water effectively.

Water cooperation and peace (SDG 16). The United Nations World Water Development Report 2024: Water for Prosperity and Peace explored water’s capacity to unite people and serve as a tool for peace, sustainable development, climate action and regional integration (UN, 2024b). There is growing recognition that water cooperation has the potential to prevent or reduce tensions and inequalities, mitigate the escalation of conflicts, support conflict management and contribute to reconciliation in post-conflict settings.

Transboundary aquifer cooperation. Data collection and exchange related to transboundary aquifers remain key challenges that many countries face. Improving data collection and assessment and taking joint action to develop cooperation on transboundary aquifers are a priority. These efforts could be supported by increasing the technical capacity of countries to assess their transboundary aquifers at the national and transboundary levels.

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.5 – The Senegalo-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin: how transboundary cooperation accelerates SDG 6.5.2 progress

The Senegalo-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin, shared by the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and Senegal, extends over 331,450 km² and supports approximately 20 million people. Increasing population growth and agricultural demand are placing significant pressure on the aquifer, heightening risks of overexploitation and declining water quality.

Riparian States have made significant progress in developing transboundary cooperation. Building on existing frameworks under the Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Sénégal (Senegal River Basin Development Organization) and the Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Gambie (Gambia River Basin Development Organization), countries are working to extend cooperation to groundwater to ensure integrated, sustainable and equitable water management.

This process began in 2018 when Senegal, following its accession to the UN Water Convention and insights from the first SDG indicator 6.5.2 reporting cycle, identified the absence of a formal cooperation framework as a critical gap. Treating reporting as a strategic diagnostic, Senegal mobilized international support in coordination with co-riparian States. With assistance from the Water Convention Secretariat, Geneva Water Hub and the International Groundwater Resources Assessment Centre, and with financial support from the European Union and Switzerland, a structured regional dialogue was launched.

This led to key milestones: the establishment of a Regional Working Group (2020), adoption of a shared vision, a Ministerial Declaration (2021), and formalized collaboration between Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Sénégal and the Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Gambie (2023). Negotiations on a formal legal agreement – supported by the Water Convention Secretariat and the World Bank – produced a consolidated draft, which was discussed and validated at a regional consultation in Dakar in January 2026. The dialogue motivated Guinea-Bissau and the Gambia to accede to the UN Water Convention in 2021 and 2023, respectively, following Senegal's accession in 2018.

For the 2023 indicator 6.5.2 reporting, countries jointly assessed the Senegalo-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin and deemed cooperation arrangements operational. As a result, three of four countries improved their indicator scores, with over 90% of transboundary basin areas covered.

The Senegalo-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin demonstrates how SDG reporting and accession to the Water Convention can catalyse cooperation, leveraging existing river basin mechanisms to advance conjunctive surface and groundwater management. This is an essential approach for enhancing water security and climate resilience.

Source: Adapted from UN-Water (2022b), updated by UNECE in May 2026

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

- **Advocate for and demonstrate the value of sustainable water management and transboundary cooperation.** Water sector professionals need to make the case for sustainable water management including

transboundary cooperation by quantifying the economic, social and environmental benefits using data, particularly at the highest levels of Heads of State and the ministries responsible for planning and finance. This includes being able to determine and communicate the economic value of water (incorporating social and environmental

dimensions) and demonstrate to a range of stakeholders that implementing IWRM and pursuing transboundary water cooperation will achieve broader development objectives.

- > **Cross-sector decision-making needs to be institutionalized.** Cross-sector coordination mechanisms need to be developed or strengthened. Intersectoral committees, including at the basin or catchment levels, should be supported by legal frameworks and budget lines, and have wide representation from across sectors, including public engagement and private sector representatives. By facilitating coordinated decision-making, these cross-sector coordination mechanisms can also support data-sharing and joint monitoring. There is a need to convert ad hoc coordination into mandated, recurring and resourced mechanisms that survive political cycles.
- > **Mainstream IWRM and water cooperation into other sector actions.** Using this approach can directly support countries to become more resilient to climate change and advance towards all water-related targets in the 2030 Agenda, including those on food (SDG 2), energy (SDG 7), climate (SDG 13) and ecosystems (SDG 15). Using supporting frameworks, such as the water–energy–food–ecosystem nexus and the source-to-sea approach, can be a practical way of operationalizing IWRM and engaging across sectors at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation.
- > **Advance progress on transboundary water cooperation by capitalizing on the two global UN Water Conventions.** Countries can capitalize on existing legal frameworks that support transboundary water cooperation, including the Water Convention, the Watercourses Convention and the 2008 draft articles on the Law of Transboundary Aquifers, for example as a basis for the negotiation and implementation of transboundary water arrangements. The Water Convention supports countries through tools, capacity-building, exchange of experience

and projects on the ground, for example in developing and implementing agreements.

- > **Mobilize funding for IWRM and transboundary water cooperation.** Given that national funding remains the key funding source, especially to cover the core costs of joint bodies, finance should be mobilized from national sources for transboundary cooperation. Innovative financing mechanisms should also be advanced, and international financial institutions should improve their financing of transboundary water cooperation for countries to capitalize on the benefits of transboundary water cooperation based on sound legal and institutional frameworks.
- > **Mainstreaming water across climate, food, energy and ecosystem agendas creates opportunities to access multiple capital pools and financing streams.** Translating IWRM into investable programmes may require basin-level financing platforms, blended finance approaches and programmatic mechanisms capable of aligning investments across sectors and jurisdictions.
- > **Fully utilize the potential of transboundary water cooperation for supporting climate action.** Countries are encouraged to embed climate change considerations into the adoption of new or revised arrangements for transboundary water cooperation, and in the tasks and activities of existing and new joint bodies. Where relevant, countries should incorporate transboundary water cooperation into their national adaptation plans and nationally determined contributions, and, where appropriate, the related efforts should be coordinated at the basin level to maximize the benefits of water-related climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

Target 6.5 – Transforming the way the water sector is managed in Saudi Arabia

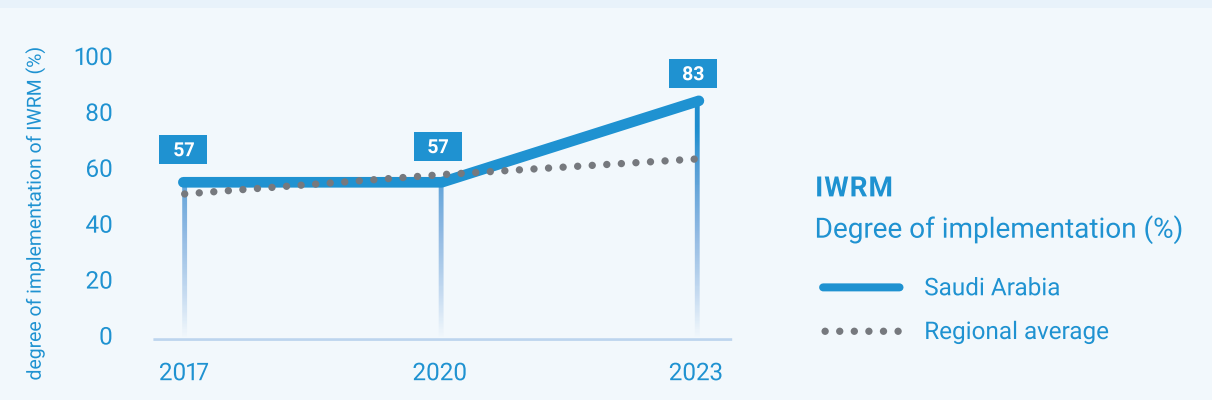


Figure 3.8. Progress on indicator 6.5.1 in Saudi Arabia, 2017–2023

Ten years ago, Saudi Arabia was lagging behind in IWRM implementation. Today, the country is transforming the way its water sector is being managed (figure 3.8). This is essential in the context of extreme water scarcity and to create conditions for the country to reach a pathway towards water sustainability. Saudi Arabia is developing its unconventional water sources to meet its needs. It is estimated that Saudi Arabia is now producing almost 5 billion m³ of water per year through the desalination of seawater and brackish groundwater, representing roughly one quarter of the water used in the country and making Saudi Arabia the largest producer of desalinated water in the world. Saudi Arabia is also investing in increasing its storage capacity and the reuse of treated sewage effluent, especially for irrigation and mining, thus increasing water security and adding a second unconventional source of water that reduces pressure on freshwater.

Key factors and drivers that may be replicated in other countries include:

- **The National Water Strategy 2030 provides a robust policy framework.** The strategy is well developed and is among the first policies developed under Saudi Vision 2030.
- **The institutional framework is articulated along the value chain.** The institutional framework clearly defines roles across the water value chain. This means dedicated entities are responsible for policy, regulation and service delivery.
- **Saudi Arabia is fostering competitiveness and mobilizing private investment.** The government facilitates the business case for privatization projects, with a bundle of enablers.
- **There is a legal obligation to meter and report water abstraction,** particularly non-renewable groundwater. The Water Law makes water meters compulsory.
- **Technological innovation is factored into water planning and regulation.** Commissioned in 2018, Al-Khafji was the first solar-powered reverse osmosis plant in Saudi Arabia, producing more than 60,000 m³ of potable water per day from seawater. Over 50% of its production is powered by renewable energy, marking a significant departure from traditional energy-intensive thermal desalination methods. The Al-Khafji facility exemplifies Saudi Arabia's strategic commitment to sustainable water sector development and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in desalination operations.

Source: UN-Water (2025c)



3.6 SDG target 6.6 – water-related ecosystems

By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes

Target 6.6 provides a critical link between SDG 6 and other SDG targets and multilateral processes related to or concerned with water-related ecosystems. Several significant impacts of target 6.6 on policy development and implementation of the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems are:

Shifting the understanding of the role of freshwater ecosystems in policy. Target 6.6 has helped to shift how freshwater ecosystems are understood in policy. Freshwater ecosystems are increasingly recognized as central to water security, climate resilience and development, rather than as a separate environmental issue. This target is supporting stronger integration across water, climate and biodiversity agendas, and helping countries bring ecosystem conditions into basin planning, national strategies and adaptation efforts.

Informing policy dialogue nationally and in multilateral environmental agreements. As indicator 6.6.1 data are available at national, basin and ecosystem scales, they are able to inform sectoral policies that affect water and ecosystems, including land use, agriculture, infrastructure and climate planning. They are also able to support multiple SDG targets and align with related frameworks under multilateral environmental agreements, including the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Global Biodiversity Framework, thus giving a broad policy reach.

Offering a common reference point. Engagement with countries on indicator 6.6.1 has helped to make changes in rivers, lakes and wetlands visible in a consistent and practical way. Through convening discussions and engaging stakeholders across sectors, indicator 6.6.1 data are serving as a common reference point. Long-term trends since 2000, alongside monthly and annual changes presented through the UNEP Freshwater

Ecosystems Explorer, provide a strong and widely accepted reference point for dialogue with countries, linking data to policy priorities and implementation.

Benefits beyond the numbers

Target 6.6 has helped to change how freshwater ecosystems are valued. It has strengthened the understanding that these systems are essential to maintaining water availability, regulating flows, reducing risk, and supporting economies and livelihoods. It has also helped to bring water, the environment, the climate and planning communities into closer alignment, supporting more coherent policy discussions and a clearer understanding of shared risks.

Ecosystem change is now more visible and harder to ignore. This has strengthened accountability and created a stronger basis for policy dialogue, even where action has not yet kept pace.

Target 6.6 has contributed to the Global Biodiversity Framework. Indicator 6.6.1 is a valuable tool for countries in enhancing their understanding of freshwater biodiversity and formulating evidence-based strategies and actions to conserve and restore these vital ecosystems as part of their national biodiversity strategy and action plans. It provides comprehensive data on the status and trends of freshwater ecosystems, including river flow, water quantity and quality, and the extent of wetlands and mangroves. It allows countries to track their progress towards achieving biodiversity conservation goals outlined in their national biodiversity strategy and action plans and to provide evidence-based information for reporting. Data reported through indicator 6.6.1 may serve as direct input and/or a complementary source of freshwater ecosystem information that is useful within several areas of the Global Biodiversity Framework monitoring framework, with particular relevance for monitoring inland waters within Global Biodiversity Framework indicators¹⁰

¹⁰ The following Global Biodiversity Framework goals, targets and indicators may benefit from SDG indicator 6.6.1 water data: Goal A, target 1, headline indicators A.1 and A.2; target 2, headline indicator 2.1; target 3, headline indicator 3.1 (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2025).

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

Implementation lags monitoring. The main issue is that monitoring has improved faster than implementation. There is now a clearer picture of ecosystem change, but this is not yet consistently influencing choices on land use, infrastructure or water allocation. In many countries, freshwater ecosystems and hydrological processes are still not adequately reflected in government processes, even where data exist.

Data remain fragmented. There are also gaps in how information is applied. Data are often fragmented, not linked to socioeconomic drivers and not translated into practical tools. Governance also remains fragmented, and investment in ecosystem protection and restoration is still far below what is needed. A more integrated and dynamic picture is needed at ecosystem and basin scales, bringing together changes in ecosystems, hydrological processes and the drivers behind them. This cannot rely on countries assembling fragmented information. The full and evolving picture needs to be accessible, coherent and usable, so that decisions reflect system realities and support long-term sustainability. For instance, developing national wetlands inventories to improve reporting on indicator 6.6.1 supports other global targets, including the Global Biodiversity Framework, land degradation neutrality and climate adaptation priority areas.

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

Towards data use for decision-making. The next phase for target 6.6 needs to move beyond monitoring as an end and become part of how decisions are made in practice. Freshwater ecosystem and hydrological information should be routinely used in planning, regulation and investment, so that development choices reflect system limits, risks and long-term sustainability. This also requires a clearer understanding of how ecosystems are changing, what is driving those changes, and what this means for economies and societies.

Clearer comparable data. A stronger focus on outcomes will also be needed. Countries need clear and comparable information on the condition of their freshwater ecosystems, including how many rivers, lakes and wetlands are in a healthy and fully functioning state. This can support more specific and measurable national targets, for example maintaining or restoring at least 80% of freshwater ecosystems in good condition. The full and evolving picture needs to be presented in a way that is coherent, comparable and directly usable, so that trade-offs, risks and long-term consequences are clear.

Shift the ambition towards 2030 and beyond. In addition to the services they provide, freshwater ecosystems should also be recognized for their role in maintaining the stability of the hydrological cycle and the wider functioning of the planet. This calls for a move from managing impacts to safeguarding system integrity, with governments taking responsibility for aligning economic activity with ecological limits.

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

- > **Freshwater ecosystems are a primary concern.** They underpin the hydrological cycle and are fundamental to water security, climate resilience, biodiversity and economic stability. Their continued degradation is already reducing the reliability of water systems and increasing exposure to floods, droughts and water scarcity. This trend is accelerating; urgent and sustained attention is vitally important.
- > **The global community is beginning to have a clearer picture of how freshwater systems are changing.** The constraint is no longer only a lack of information, but how consistently it is used. This understanding needs to inform planning, regulation and investment, alongside clearer expectations on maintaining and restoring healthy and functioning rivers, lakes and wetlands.
- > **The scale of change is significant.** Protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems need to be treated as core investments in resilience. Progress will depend on coordinated action

across governments, sectors and stakeholders, supported by stronger governance and sustained financing. Advancing this will depend on making better use of available data, improving coordination across institutions, and ensuring countries have access to integrated, decision-ready information that reflects how water systems function and respond to pressure over time.

- **Natural capital valuation and integration in all aspects of decision-making must be improved.** Valuation failures drive unsustainable

production and consumption practices and processes, ultimately degrading water-related ecosystems. There is a pressing need to address these valuation failures by recognizing water-related ecosystems as a shared benefit, embedding wetlands into natural capital accounting and changing the approach to finance. Policies should also be reformed to better support wetland conservation and, importantly, to prevent degradation before it occurs (Convention on Wetlands, 2025).

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Target 6.6 – Czechia is investing significantly in nature-based solutions to protect and restore water-related ecosystems

Czechia's water and sanitation management has been steadily improving since the 1990s and the country is making progress on all SDG 6 indicators. In 2017, the Government of Czechia adopted the Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030, through which the country aims to reverse two trends: the increase of soil and forest degradation and the decrease of their ability to retain water; and the increase in surface water contamination by discharge from diffuse and point sources of pollution. Czechia is therefore aiming to significantly slow down the outflow of water from the landscape and to improve the quality of surface and groundwater. For example, the large scale construction of high-quality wastewater treatment plants equipped with modern technologies has led to a significant reduction in the share of heavily and severely polluted water courses throughout Czechia.

Grey infrastructure and nature-based solutions have been combined. To reduce the risk of flood and drought, Czechia has distributed over \$400 million since 2014 to promote water soaking into the ground and being retained in the open landscape and in urbanized areas. Moreover, the post-coronavirus disease National Recovery Plan assumes investment of over \$600 million to improve the sustainability of the agricultural and forestry landscape in the context of climate change, as well as investments in flood protection and small water reservoirs. Significant investments have been targeted at increasing water retention in forests through various forest conservation measures that improve the soil, water and microclimatic conditions, reduce accelerated erosion, lead to modification of the water cycle in forest soil, and to the protection and stabilization of forest watercourses.

Source: Adapted from UN-Water (2024b)

Box 3.2. Rethinking monitoring of the means of implementation for SDG 6 – Targets 6.a and 6.b

When UN Member States adopted the universal, integrated and transformative 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs in September 2015, they expressed their determination “to mobilize the means required to implement” it (UN, General Assembly, 2015a). Given the central importance of sufficient “means of implementation” to achieve the SDGs, Member States adopted 43 means of implementation targets under Goals 1–16, denoted by letters, and a dedicated Goal 17: “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”.

These targets underpin achievement of the sustainable development outcomes envisaged by the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs. The UN describes means of implementation as “the interdependent mix of financial resources, technology development and transfer, capacity-building, inclusive and equitable globalization and trade, regional integration, as well as the creation of a national enabling environment required to implement the new sustainable development agenda, particularly in developing countries” (DESA, 2014). For SDG 6, two of the eight targets are formulated as means of implementation targets: target 6.a addresses international cooperation and target 6.b focuses on local participation to improve water and sanitation management.

While there is broad agreement on the importance of the means of implementation for achievement of the SDGs, in practice, the definition of indicators for targets 6.a and 6.b, and the monitoring thereof has proved difficult. Bartram and others (2018) and Takane and others (2025) discuss broader challenges related to these targets and indicators. Despite broad agreement on the importance of the means of implementation for achievement of the SDGs, the formulation of SDG 6 means of implementation targets and indicators is suboptimal. The translation of the multifaceted means of implementation targets into measurable indicators has been problematic, and the indicators lack directionality, making meaningful data aggregation and interpretation difficult.

Four actions have been identified that can improve monitoring of the means of implementation for water and sanitation up to 2030 and for the processes leading up to “post-2030”:

- Communicate a bigger picture narrative about the means of implementation for SDG 6 beyond the two existing SDG 6 means of implementation indicators (6.a.1 and 6.b.1). Give higher profile to the means of implementation for SDG 6 in policy briefs, SDG reports, UN conferences and high-level meetings on water and sanitation.
- Invest in country-level efforts to strengthen national monitoring and review systems and data-collection pipelines for priority means of implementation-type areas for SDG 6 acceleration.
- Generate evidence, document lessons learned and synthesize technical recommendations on water and sanitation drivers of progress and good practices for monitoring means of implementation-type targets and indicators. Develop and test potential candidate means of implementation-type indicators for water and sanitation across SDG 6. Provide timely technical inputs related to means of implementation for water and sanitation in global and regional processes.
- Advocate for means of implementation for water and sanitation. Facilitate dialogue and build consensus around means of implementation-related topics and monitoring for water and sanitation. Leverage the UN Financing for Development processes and SDG 17, as well as meetings of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators to bring greater attention and build support for an improved approach for means of implementation targets and indicators in the post-2030 sustainable development framework.

By reinforcing the connections between inputs and outcomes, and by embedding means of implementation more coherently across all SDG 6 targets, monitoring can become a catalyst for transformation. Countries must be at the centre of all efforts to improve global monitoring processes, especially for the means of implementation, which are so intimately linked with national systems. The collective efforts required to achieve SDG 6 are significant and can happen only through a revitalized commitment to mobilizing the necessary means of implementation.

Source: Adapted from Takane and others (2025)



3.7 SDG target 6.a – international cooperation

By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies

Target 6.a is one of two means of implementation targets for SDG 6 (see box 3.2). The most significant impacts on policy development and implementation of international cooperation and capacity-building include the following:

Elevated political prioritization of international cooperation for water and sanitation. Political visibility for international cooperation and capacity-building as a stand-alone target within the 2030 Agenda encourages donors and development partners to prioritize water and sanitation within their strategies. In the GLAAS 2024/2025 development partner survey, most responding development partners actively engaging in the water and sanitation sector reported having a multi-year strategy specifically for water and sanitation (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Facilitated more multifaceted aid tracking over time. Donor countries report annually on the amount ODA they provide for water-related activities and programmes to the OECD-Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS). The OECD-CRS data explorer offers a means to annually track the volume (commitments or disbursements), type (e.g. grants or ODA loans), purpose (e.g. large and basic water supply and sanitation systems, IWRM, policy, education and training) and geographic distribution of ODA, as well as aid commitments and disbursements by donor. It also enables comparison of ODA related to water and sanitation (SDG 6) relative to other major aid sectors such as health, agriculture, emergency response, refugees, energy and education.

Promoted aid alignment between donors and recipients.

Alignment of donor funding with national priorities and spending plans is a key element of indicator 6.a.1. Recipient countries report on indicator 6.a.1 through the GLAAS country survey questions related to “external financing”. While challenging to monitor, this dimension of the indicator has brought increased attention to issues related to aid alignment between donor and recipients. In practice, it shows a mixed picture. In 2024, over half of countries reported funds were predominantly¹¹ aligned with national water sector plans; however, 30% of all responding countries reported low alignment¹² between donor funding and national water sector plans. Low-income countries were more likely to report low funding alignment compared to higher-income countries, although alignment for low-income countries has increased considerably since 2021 (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Benefits beyond the numbers

Gender equality is a significant component of water and sanitation ODA. The percentage of water and sanitation ODA disbursement with a significant gender equality component rose from 23% in 2010 to 40% (\$3.2 billion) in 2024 (OECD-CRS, 2026). Of the development partners that responded in the GLAAS 2024/2025 development partner survey, half reported gender is a top five aid priority for their organization, and a quarter noted that menstrual health and hygiene is a high priority or focus for their water and sanitation activities (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Water and sanitation ODA designated for climate change adaptation grew more than fivefold from 2010 to 2024. Water and sanitation ODA designated for climate change adaptation increased from \$500 million to \$3.3 billion between 2010 and 2024 (a 560% increase). In 2024, 40% of water and sanitation ODA disbursement (\$3.3 billion) was designated for climate change adaptation as the principal or a significant objective, while 17% (\$1.4 billion) was designated for climate

¹¹ “Predominantly” is defined here as funds that are at least 75% aligned with water sector plans.

¹² “Low” alignment corresponds to less than 50% of funds aligned with the national water sector plan.

change mitigation as the principal or a significant objective (OECD-CRS, 2026). The proportion of water and sanitation ODA designated for climate change adaptation as the principal or significant objective tripled as a percentage of disbursements from 2010 to 2022 (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

Target 6.a is much broader than a single monitoring indicator. Many aspects of international cooperation and capacity-building support covered within the scope of Target 6.a are not systematically monitored, including: partnerships (e.g. North–South or South–South), joint initiatives, education and capacity-development programmes. Efforts are ongoing to explore possible indicators and methodologies to monitor capacity-building.

ODA (indicator 6.a.1) is not a main driver of progress. ODA represents only a small fraction of the total international cooperation mobilized for the implementation of SDG 6 and comprises only a fraction of the total financing required to achieve the Goal. Member States are the primary actors responsible for financing water and sanitation in their own countries. A World Bank report found that about 91% of total spending in the water sector came from the public sector – governments and State-owned enterprises (Joseph and others, 2024). GLAAS survey data estimated external aid comprises less than 18% of total funding for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, in the form of grants (3%) and repayable finance (14%) (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). In this context, grants and concessional finance increasingly function as catalytic capital rather than primary financing sources. Their strategic value lies in mobilizing additional domestic, climate and commercial capital through blended finance structures, guarantees, project preparation support and risk-sharing mechanisms.

The ODA reporting system is not fully aligned with SDG 6 targets. As the OECD-CRS purpose codes predate the SDGs, it is difficult to

obtain a clear picture of how ODA allocated for water and sanitation activities supports the achievement of specific SDG 6 targets.

ODA to the water sector is likely to decline in the future. Since 2023, multiple donors have announced broad cuts to ODA. The OECD found a 23.1% drop in ODA in 2025, on top of reductions in 2024 (OECD, 2026). It is expected that the effects on water sector ODA will start to be visible in the next OECD-CRS reporting cycle. While external aid flows may comprise a low proportion of global expenditure on the water sector, nearly half of GLAAS responding countries reported at least one government ministry or institution received a significant share (greater than 25%) of its drinking water, sanitation and hygiene budget from donors (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). Furthermore, latest data show ODA priorities within SDG 6 are shifting, with a decrease in the overall share of ODA allocated to water supply and sanitation and an increase in agricultural water (OECD-CRS, 2026).

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

Leveraging increasingly scarce ODA funding for scaling finance. Recognizing that funding needed to reach national targets exceeds financial flows and that development aid may become increasingly scarce in the coming years, governments and development partners are seeking to leverage limited resources to mobilize additional funding for water and sanitation from government, commercial finance, the private sector and other donors (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). The strategic question is no longer simply how to increase grants, but how limited grant resources can be structured to mobilize significantly larger volumes of non-grant finance.

More disaggregated analysis and reporting using existing data sets for indicator 6.a.1 can improve understanding of ODA trends for water and sanitation. Efforts are under way to analyse and report disaggregated data for ODA flows by: (a) water and sanitation subsectors, showing results where feasible by SDG 6 indicator and policy marker, (b) donor perspective and (c)

type of aid and channels for how aid is provided (WHO, 2025). This can help to better understand aid flows to the SDG 6-related sectors.

Explore approaches for monitoring capacity-building support. Capacity-building is a core element of target 6.a, yet it is not tracked as part of the SDG indicator framework. Efforts are under way to identify and test potential candidate indicators to measure and track the capacity-building support element of target 6.a.

Support countries to improve tracking of financial flows for water and sanitation. A growing number of countries are adopting the TrackFin methodology to develop “WASH accounts” (WHO, n.d.b), which provides a comprehensive, standardized overview of financial flows and expenditure for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. By providing a clear picture of how resources are allocated and spent, WASH accounts enable governments and development partners to identify financing gaps, compare spending against investment plans, and monitor international commitments and progress towards financial targets. As of September 2025, 40 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America have developed or are developing WASH accounts (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). Greater efforts are required to expand tracking of financial flows for other SDG 6 targets beyond 6.1 and 6.2.

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

- > **Prioritize water and sanitation within ODA portfolios.** Advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns can emphasize the return on investment that water and sanitation projects deliver in terms of public health, gender equality and economic productivity. It is important to demonstrate the effectiveness of ODA in water and sanitation through transparent, measurable outcomes showcasing successful case studies and leveraging them to build the case for increased funding (DESA, 2024).
- > **Grants can increasingly function as catalytic capital,** capable of mobilizing significantly larger

volumes of repayable and private finance through concessional lending, guarantees, blended finance structures and domestic capital market instruments. Domestic capital markets may play an increasingly important role in financing water infrastructure, particularly where utilities and local authorities can access institutional investors through structured financing mechanisms. Revenue bonds, pooled financing facilities and subnational financing models demonstrate the potential to diversify financing sources beyond sovereign borrowing and external aid. Expanding water sector investment will require wider use of de-risking instruments commonly deployed in other infrastructure sectors, including guarantees, first-loss capital, liquidity facilities and foreign exchange risk mitigation mechanisms.

- > **Strengthen national monitoring and review mechanisms for means of implementation-type indicators.** Build on the experience from monitoring indicator 6.a.1, invest in country-level efforts to strengthen national monitoring and review systems and data-collection pipelines for priority means of implementation-type areas for SDG 6 acceleration such as financing, capacity development, innovation, governance, data and monitoring (WHO, 2025).
- > **Communicate a bigger picture narrative about SDG 6 means of implementation beyond the existing indicators.** The means of implementation targets and indicators (6.a and 6.b) only scratch the surface of the actual “means” required to achieve SDG 6. Addressing the broader scope of means of implementation-related topics is needed to achieve the targets, notably those contained in the five SDG 6 global “accelerators”: financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation and governance (UN-Water, 2020a). The SDG 6 means of implementation assessment identified tracking financial flows for water and sanitation, beyond ODA (indicator 6.a.1), as the top priority topic for future means of implementation-type monitoring (Takane and others, 2025).

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Target 6.a – Building partnerships for innovation and technology transfer in Jordan

Despite a context of water scarcity and an influx of refugees, Jordan has made significant progress in increasing access to safely managed drinking water, sanitation, water quality and integrated water resources management. Few countries have shown such commitment to increase the water-use efficiency of irrigation and the reuse of treated wastewater. A key factor of success has been Jordan's capacity to mobilize technical cooperation at all levels. Jordan received support and technology transfer from development partners at all levels, from national authorities to local communities.

Huge efforts have been made to increase efficiency of irrigation. With the support of development partners, solutions such as the use of crops that are less water intensive, drip irrigation, precision fertigation (i.e. using drip irrigation to distribute the right amounts of fertilizers and pesticides, together with water) and drainage water reuse were successfully piloted and deployed, first along the King Abdullah Canal in the Jordan Valley. These solutions were then scaled up across the country, following demand from farmers, who suffer from water scarcity and irregular supply.

Samra Wastewater Treatment Plant. Starting in 2008, the Samra Wastewater Treatment Plant has been collecting wastewater from the capital city of Amman and is now producing more than half of the treated wastewater in the country. This represents around 10% of Jordan's water supply. Samra is also self-sufficient in renewable energy, generating enough hydropower and biogas to cover its operational needs. It is the first build, operate and transfer investment in Jordan's water sector. The project was supported by the United States Agency for International Development and the Millenium Challenge Corporation.

Jordan has invested heavily in the reuse of treated wastewater. As the available water is not sufficient for irrigation, domestic and other purposes, solutions have been developed to reuse water, always seeking new technologies and tools to improve treatment facilities. The country can now count on the Samra wastewater treatment plant, as well as more than 30 smaller wastewater treatment plants, including mining sites and refugee camps. The treated wastewater is mixed with fresh water and reused, mostly for irrigation purposes. Other such plants are planned across the country.

Source: Adapted from UN-Water (2024c)



3.8 SDG target 6.b – participation of local communities

Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management

Target 6.b is one of few targets in the SDG framework that addresses public participation. Strengthening community participation is fundamental to adapting and sustaining solutions for water and sanitation management to local contexts and to ensure no one is left behind. While there have

been some practical limitations (see box 3.2), target 6.b has had a positive impact on policy and implementation in the following areas:

Direct link to human rights principles. Target 6.b directly addresses the human rights principle of participation. The right to participation is enshrined in numerous international human rights instruments. The 1986 UN Declaration on the Right to Development, although not legally binding, has significantly influenced the understanding of participation, and article 2, para. 3, requires participation to be “active, free and meaningful” (UN, General Assembly, 1986).

Including a target on participation within SDG 6 bridges the progressive realization of the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation for all (UN, General Assembly, 2010, 2015b) and the 2030 Agenda (UN, General Assembly, 2015a).

Recognition of the importance of participation and accountability within SDG 6. The adoption of target 6.b has fostered discussion and reflection on the nature of meaningful and inclusive participation in improving water and sanitation management. Community participation can take different forms, and is closely related to accountability mechanisms for service providers. Table 3.1 shows the percentage of GLAAS responding countries where at least 75% of the rural population has access to different types of participation and accountability mechanisms. The results by World Bank income group show rural populations in low-income countries are less likely to have access to all types of participation and accountability mechanisms compared to middle- and high-income countries (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Benefits beyond the numbers

Promoted principle of participation across SDG 6. Areas related to SDG 6 covering drinking water services, sanitation and hygiene services, water tenure, water resources management, transboundary cooperation are all based on the principle of participation. The GLAAS survey includes

questions related to the availability of defined procedures for participation, types of opportunities to participate and the actual level of participation for six subsectors, including urban and rural drinking water and sanitation, hand hygiene, and water resources planning and management. Additionally, the indicator 6.5.1 survey contains a question on participation mechanisms for vulnerable groups. Stakeholder participation is a key element of IWRM, including governmental and non-governmental organizations and the private sector, at all levels, with consideration of gender and vulnerable groups (UNEP, 2024a). Stakeholder engagement is also one of the OECD water governance principles, promoting inclusive decision-making.

Greater attention to women’s participation. In the GLAAS 2024/2025 country survey, procedures for women’s participation are in place for the majority of responding countries. Nearly 80% of sub-Saharan Africa countries reported that women’s participation was defined in law or policy. However, less than one third of countries reported high levels of women’s participation in practice. Women’s participation was reported to be highest in countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Asian (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). In spite of progress, barriers still exist for women to fully exercise equal rights to water and essential services (see box 3.3).

Table 3.1. Percentage of GLAAS 2024/2025 survey responding countries reporting at least 75% of rural populations have opportunities for participation in sanitation and drinking water services

World Bank income group	<i>n</i>	Access to publicity available information	Regular opportunities for public engagement (such as meetings with service providers or local government responsible for WASH services)	Access to formal feedback systems	Mechanism to receive, document and resolve conflicts and resolve conflicts through regulatory authorities
All responding countries	94	31%	37%	36%	38%
Low income	19	11%	16%	5%	21%
Low-middle income	36	31%	44%	42%	31%
Upper middle-income	28	29%	32%	39%	46%
High income	11	73%	64%	64%	73%

Source: WHO and UNICEF (2025b)

● 0–25% ● 26–50% ● 51–75% ● 76–100%

Box 3.3. Highlights from the United Nations World Water Development Report-2026

The UN World Water Development Report 2026 - *Water for All People: Equal Rights and Opportunities* - highlights the importance of gender equality related to the access, use, management and governance of water resources, including water supply and sanitation services. Access to clean, safe, and affordable water and sanitation, along with the equitable and meaningful participation of women in water governance, is relevant not only in the context of SDG6, but also for poverty reduction and to building healthier, fairer societies with broad social and economic benefits.

The Report stands as a call to action to close the gender gaps in water access and leadership. It lays out a pathway for meaningful progress, beginning with the need to address the legal, institutional, and financial barriers that still prevent women from fully exercising equal rights to water and essential services. Alongside this, it emphasizes the need of scaling up gender-responsive financing and budgeting, supported by accountability mechanisms capable of turning commitments into real change. A central priority is the investment in sex-disaggregated water data, which can bring hidden inequalities to light and provide stronger evidence base for more equitable and effective policymaking.

The Report also brings attention to the urgency of strengthening women's leadership and capacities, particularly in the scientific and technical domains of water governance, where their representation remains limited. Finally, it calls for a shift away from apparent "low-cost" solutions that do not account for unpaid labour, urging instead for approaches that promote fairness and long-term sustainability.

The UN World Water Development Report is published by UNESCO on behalf of UN-Water, and its production is coordinated by the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme. The report gives insight into the main trends concerning the state, use and management of freshwater and sanitation, based on work by UN-Water Members and Partners.

Source: UN (2026)

Main challenges, limitations and gaps

Lack of designated institutional anchors. In the GLAAS 2024/2025 country survey, many responding countries highlighted they do not have an institution responsible for target 6.b, which impedes fully operationalizing efforts towards the target. Countries with a designated agency or institution responsible for participatory procedures are more likely to report high levels of participation. Forty-seven per cent of countries (24 of 51) reported having a responsible agency or institution and high levels of participation in rural sanitation and drinking water, compared to countries with low levels of participation, where only 2% (1 of 51) reported having a responsible agency or institution (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

Participatory processes are significantly under-resourced, particularly in low-income countries.

Lack of financial and human resources constrains participation of users and communities. Only 9% of GLAAS responding countries (8 of 92) reported having sufficient¹³ financial resources to support the participation of users and communities for rural drinking water and sanitation, and only 11% (10 of 89) for water resources planning and management. Similarly, only 13% of countries (12 of 89) reported having sufficient human resources to support participation in rural drinking water, and only 13% (11 of 83) for water resources planning management (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b).

¹³ In the GLAAS 2024/2025 cycle, "sufficient financial resources" and "sufficient human resources" were defined as having at least 75% of what is needed.

Implementing and monitoring effective participatory processes for all areas of SDG 6 remain complex. Indicator 6.b.1 is measured by the UN-Water GLAAS survey through question A13 that collects country data used to calculate “Proportion of countries with clearly defined procedures in law or policy for participation by service users and communities in planning programmes” and “Proportion of countries with a high level of users and communities participating in planning programmes” for six subsectors: (a) urban sanitation, (b) rural sanitation, (c) urban drinking water supply, (d) rural drinking water supply, (e) hygiene promotion and (f) water resources planning and management. The data for two representative subsectors are reported to the UN Statistics Division to be included in the SDG global database: rural drinking water supply, and water resources planning and management. Participation is also monitored through the IWRM country survey (indicator 6.5.1) as part of pillar 2 on “institutions and participation”. The layers of measurement, subsectors and reporting demonstrate the complex monitoring environment (Bartram and others, 2018; Jiménez and others, 2019).

Meaningful participation is contextual. Global monitoring processes require alignment of definitions and harmonization of processes. It has been difficult to apply a standardized approach for target 6.b that is universal – pertinent for a wide diversity of national and local contexts as well as relevant for all areas covered by SDG 6 targets and delivery models. Meaningful participation is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach; instead, it needs a contextualized approach.

Next horizons – towards 2030 and beyond

Broaden the scope of “participation” using innovative approaches. Given the diverse contexts, there is an opportunity to bring greater innovation and local contextualization to the modalities of participation that are tracked as part of indicator 6.b.1. For example, through the use of digital platforms – applications that increase availability of public information, assess customer

satisfaction with services, and respond faster to complaints and grievances – as well as other innovative approaches to engage the public.

Strengthened linkage with effective, accountable and transparent institutions (SDG 16). Going forward, there is an opportunity to explore possible strengthened linkages with indicator 16.6.2 that monitors satisfaction with public services for three sectors (health, education and government services) based on five specific attributes: accessibility, affordability, quality, equal treatment for everyone and effective delivery of the service. For example, water and sanitation services could be included as an additional sector in the indicator 16.6.2 survey questionnaire (Takane and others, 2025).

Key messages to Member States and policymakers

- > **Designate an agency or institution responsible for participatory procedures.** Institutional capacity and accountability are required to operationalize participatory procedures. Countries with a designated agency or institution responsible for participatory procedures have reported higher levels of participation.
- > **Meaningful participation requires structured processes and channels** that engage with stakeholders as active partners, not observers. Inclusive, transboundary and multi-stakeholder cooperation – with meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, women, youth and local communities – is essential for effective water action (Informal Preparatory Working Group for Interactive Dialogue Theme (d), 2026). Meaningful participation goes beyond mere access to participatory processes and should include mechanisms to assess the quality, inclusiveness and balance of power in participation, particularly for under-represented groups.

SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study

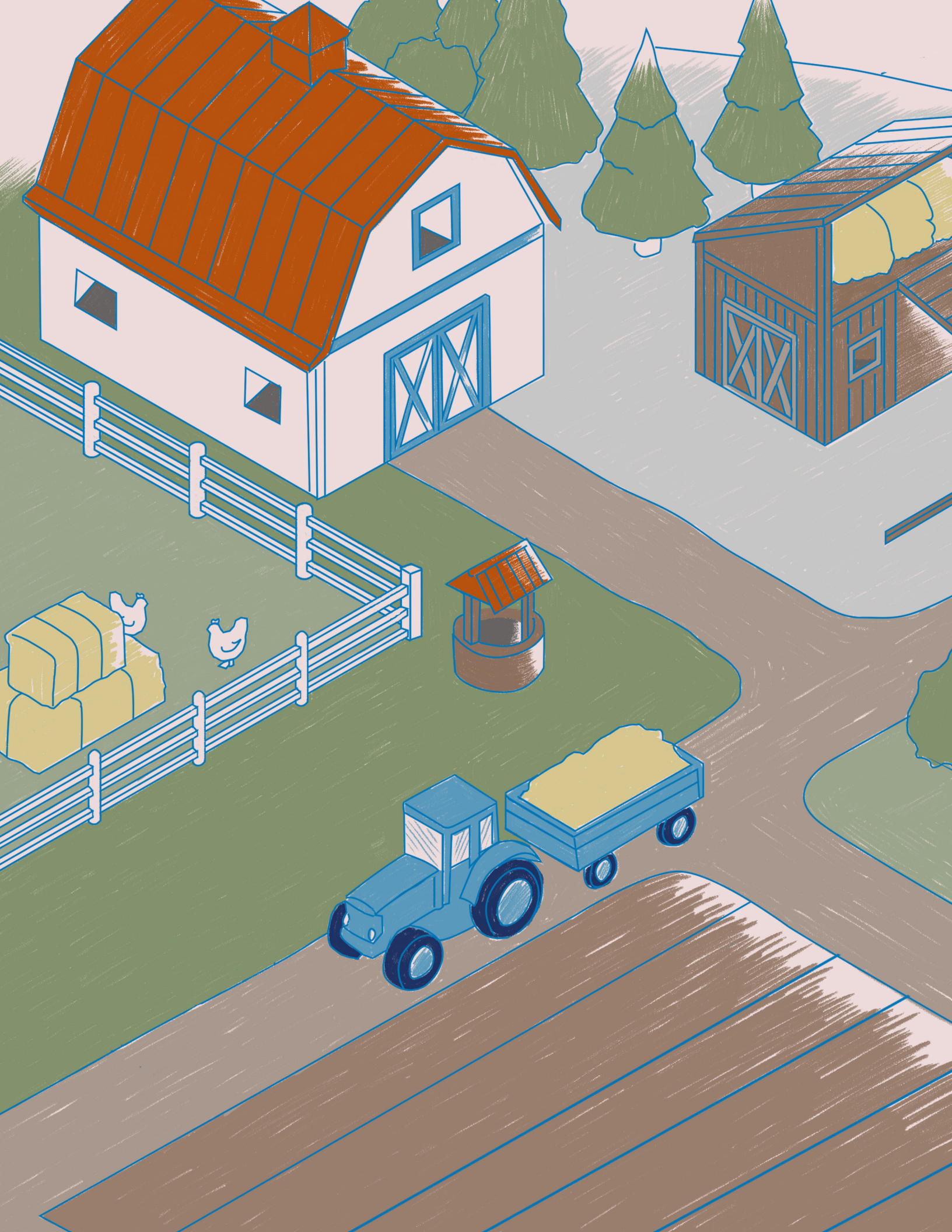
Target 6b – Water resources tariff supports participatory management in Costa Rica

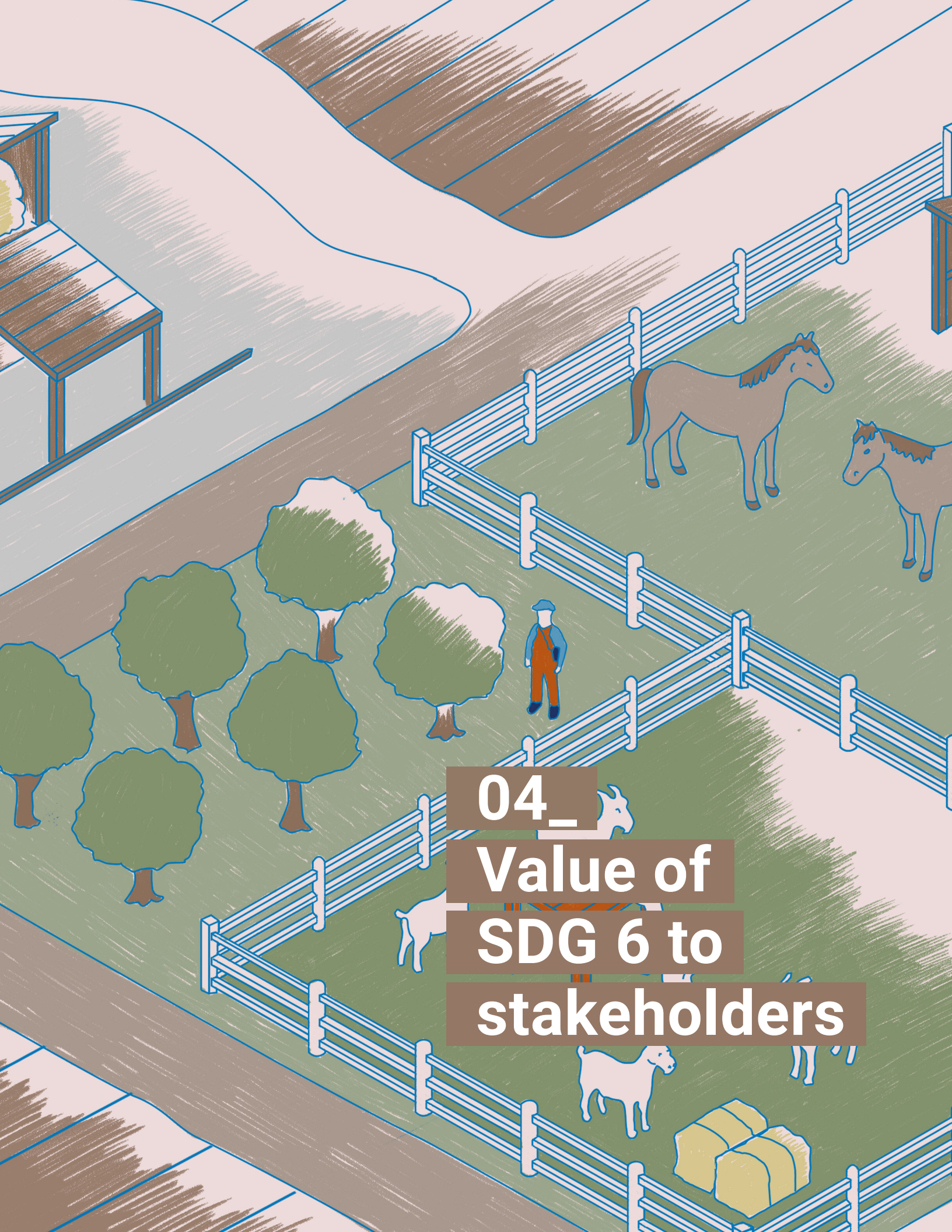
Since the late 1990s, Costa Rica has had a water resource protection tariff that enables water service operators to obtain, from their users, additional funds to finance activities to protect, restore, preserve and improve aquifer-related ecosystems, as well as to promote a new approach to water management in the communities they supply.

The tariff supports the promotion of a new water culture through formal and non-formal education, promotion of good practices and community involvement in participatory management to help realize the human right to drinking water.

The tariff has made it possible to increase efforts to safeguard aquifer-related ecosystems and to promote participatory management and involvement of the population. Other mechanisms and regulations in the country also support the tariff, such as water-use standards and environmental standards for waste management, which can be used to obtain funding for environmental management and protection initiatives, particularly concerning water resources.

Source: UN-Water (2022c)





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Value of SDG 6 to stakeholders

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs, Member States set forth an ambitious, universal plan of action. While Member States formally adopted the SDGs, their development, implementation and follow-up have been, and continue to be, a collaborative multi-stakeholder endeavour. “Partnership” is embedded in the 2030 Agenda and a central component of Goal 17: “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development” (UN, General Assembly, 2015a). Implementation of the 2030 Agenda calls for coordinated actions and requires collective engagement by stakeholders.

Given the cross-cutting nature of water, a broad, diverse community of stakeholders actively engages in the implementation of SDG 6. This includes governments, the UN system, intergovernmental organizations, international financial institutions, other interested international bodies, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, academic institutions, the scientific community, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, the private sector and philanthropic organizations.

This chapter seeks to capture direct feedback from the “users of SDG 6”, State and non-State actors, on critical questions:

- > What has been the main value of having a dedicated SDG on water and sanitation?
- > How effectively has SDG 6 contributed to equity, partnerships and integration?
- > Looking beyond 2030, how valuable would it be to have a dedicated goal on water and sanitation?
- > How has SDG 6 shaped the efforts of the UN system on water and sanitation?

It synthesizes the findings from several global surveys including the UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2026 public consultation survey (UN-Water, 2025d), conducted by UN-Water in late 2025 as an input to the report, and the Mid-term External Review of the IMI-SDG6 – Phase 3 (Hydroconseil, 2026a). It also

explores stakeholder contributions towards SDG 6 through voluntary commitments registered on the SDG Actions Platform and those contained in the Water Action Agenda, launched in support of the UN 2023 Water Conference.

After 10 years of implementation, SDG 6 has significantly shaped the UN system’s efforts to coordinate and deliver water and sanitation priorities. This chapter focuses on updates since the UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023 (UN, 2023a) and draws on findings from the Mid-term External Review of the UN-Water 2030 Strategy (Hydroconseil, 2026b).

4.1 Stakeholders’ perceptions of the value of SDG 6

This section summarizes the main findings from the SDG 6 public consultation survey. Box 4.1 presents an overview of the survey’s objectives, methods and profile of respondents and key messages are presented below in section 4.2.

Stakeholders value the role of SDG 6 in achieving political commitment and driving action

Overall, the SDG 6 public consultation survey respondents viewed SDG 6 as having elevated water and sanitation within political agendas, policy discussions and development planning processes (see table 4.1). They also emphasized its role in increasing public awareness and strengthening the visibility of water and sanitation at national and international levels. For many respondents, having a dedicated global goal on water and sanitation has strengthened advocacy, helped engage decision makers, and reinforced water and sanitation as development priorities. While a significant share of respondents also identified mobilizing funding and investment as an important value of SDG 6, they cited this less frequently than its agenda-setting, awareness-raising and advocacy functions.

Box 4.1. UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2026 public consultation survey

As a contribution to the 2026 HLPF in-depth review of SDG 6, UN-Water undertook a global public consultation survey to seek views from a wide range of stakeholders on the perceived value of SDG 6, examining progress, gaps and future directions for water and sanitation in the global development agenda. The consultation sought to uncover how SDG 6 has been experienced by those working most closely with its targets and implementation. The survey therefore provides insights into perceived value, effectiveness and limitations, as well as expectations for the post-2030 period. A total of 1,261 responses were received during the consultation period.

The survey reached a diverse group of respondents with strong professional engagement in water and sanitation across multiple regions, institutional contexts and levels of work. Geographically, respondents were most frequently based in sub-Saharan Africa (36%) and the Asia-Pacific (18%) regions, with additional representation from Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and North America (figure 4.1). A notable share of respondents identified their work as global or multi-regional in scope (16%). Overall, the Global South accounts for a majority of the responses (60–70%). This geographic distribution suggests the consultation captured perspectives from contexts where water and sanitation challenges are highly visible and deeply embedded in development processes, as well as from international actors supporting policy, financing and coordination.

In terms of level of work, respondents most commonly reported engagement at the national and subnational/local levels, often in combination with involvement at regional or global levels. Over half of respondents identified national-level engagement (53%), and close to two fifths reported working at subnational or local levels. This pattern reflects the governance reality of water and sanitation, where policy formulation, resource allocation and service delivery are distributed across levels of government. It also indicates many respondents are directly exposed to implementation constraints and trade-offs.

Respondents reported working across water supply and sanitation, water resources management, or both, with a relatively balanced distribution across these areas. A significant share of respondents identified their work as spanning both domains, while others reported more specialized engagement in either service delivery or resource management. This distribution indicates the survey captured perspectives from across the breadth of the water sector. Respondents span a wide range of age groups. Most respondents fall between the ages of 35 and 54 years (55%), with robust participation from young professionals (20%). This distribution indicates the survey captured perspectives from multiple age cohorts, reflecting a range of professional stages within the water and sanitation sector. In terms of gender, men represented a larger share of respondents (59%).

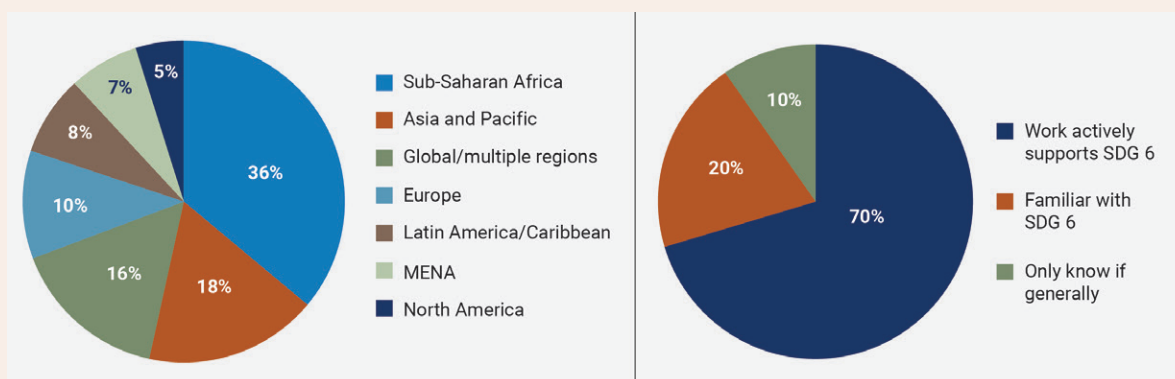


Figure 4.1. (a) Region of work of respondents and (b) familiarity with SDG 6

Note: MENA = Middle East and North Africa.

Source: Data from the SDG 6 public consultation survey (UN-Water, 2025d)

Table 4.1. What has been the main value of SDG 6 (top responses, multiple permitted)?

Main value of SDG 6	Response rate
Achieving political commitment and driving action towards the SDG 6 targets	57%
Creating public awareness/raising visibility for water and sanitation	51%
Mobilizing funding and investment	33%
Improving efficiency in the use of water resources	22%
Enabling monitoring and accountability	20%
Improving water governance	20%
Aligning efforts across sectors	16%
Facilitating partnerships and collaboration	16%

Source: Data from the SDG 6 public consultation survey (UN-Water, 2025d)

Respondents highlighted the role of SDG 6 in supporting alignment across sectors and facilitating partnerships and collaboration across stakeholder groups. Additionally, they valued the contributions of SDG 6 to governance-related aspects such as improving efficiency in the use of water resources and enabling monitoring and accountability. These responses point to the contribution of SDG 6 to the enabling environment for action, even where outcomes remain constrained by structural factors.

Along similar lines, the Mid-term External Review of the IMI-SDG6 – Phase 3 conducted a survey of the country focal points responsible for national SDG 6 monitoring, which included a similar question on the value of having a dedicated SDG on water and sanitation (Hydroconseil, 2026a). Respondents to this IMI-SDG6 survey scored “achieving political commitment and driving action towards the SDG 6 targets” with the highest share of responses (70%), followed by improved water governance (62%) and “creating public awareness/raising visibility for water and sanitation” (56%). Country monitoring focal points scored “aligning efforts across sectors” significantly higher as an added value of SDG 6 (53%) than stakeholders (16%). Less than 1% of responses by country monitoring focal points indicated there was limited or no value of SDG 6 (Hydroconseil, 2026a). While there is overall agreement that SDG 6 has added significant value, different stakeholder groups value its benefits differently and to a different extent.

The SDG 6 public consultation survey respondents were also asked whether SDG 6 is impactful, useful and achievable (see figure 4.2). Overall, the respondents viewed SDG 6 as:

- > **Completely useful** – across these dimensions, “usefulness” is rated most strongly. A large majority of respondents indicated SDG 6 is *mostly or completely useful*, reflecting appreciation for its role as a reference point, organizing framework, and shared language across actors and institutions.
- > **Mostly impactful** – perceptions of “impact” are more mixed. While many respondents consider SDG 6 to be *mostly impactful*, fewer describe it as *completely impactful*. This suggests respondents recognize influence at the level of agendas and processes, while expressing reservations about outcomes and systemic change.
- > **Partially achievable under current conditions** – a substantial share of respondents considered SDG 6 somewhat achievable under current conditions, and a notable minority indicated it is not achievable under current conditions. This pattern highlights a recurring distinction in respondents’ assessments between the conceptual value of SDG 6 and the practical feasibility of achieving its targets given current financing, governance and capacity constraints in practice.

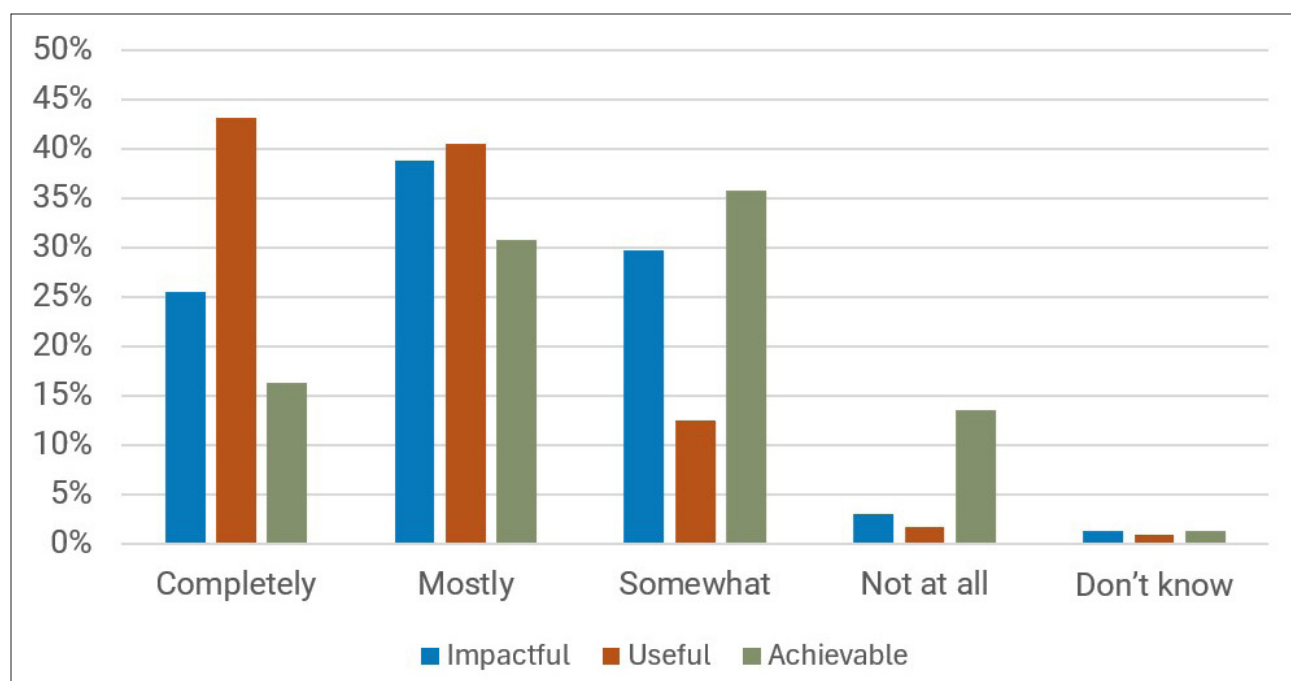


Figure 4.2. Was SDG 6 impactful, useful and achievable?

Source: Data from the SDG 6 public consultation survey (UN-Water, 2025d)

Leaving no one behind. Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which SDG 6 has contributed to advancing the principle of leaving no one behind in the context of water and sanitation. The most common response was that SDG 6 has led to some progress towards this objective, followed by limited progress. A smaller share of respondents reported significant progress, while few indicated no progress. Taken together, these responses suggest respondents recognize movement towards addressing exclusion and disparities, while also indicating progress in reaching the most marginalized populations has been insufficient relative to the scale of the challenge.

Partnerships. Respondents were also asked whether SDG 6 has improved engagement and partnerships among stakeholders, including government, civil society, the private sector and communities. Most respondents reported moderate improvement, indicating SDG 6 has contributed to increased dialogue, coordination and interaction among actors. However, relatively few respondents reported complete improvement.

Cross-sector collaboration. A slight majority reported SDG 6 has helped to break down barriers and encourage collaboration across sectors such as health, agriculture, energy and environment. At the same time, a substantial minority indicated no major change has occurred, and a smaller share reported existing barriers were reinforced. These findings point to partial progress towards integration alongside persistent institutional and sectoral silos.

Perceived strengths and areas of success of SDG 6

The responses from stakeholders nonetheless reveal consistent patterns regarding where SDG 6 is perceived to have added value:

- **SDG 6 has raised the political profile of water and sanitation.** Many respondents described SDG 6 as having elevated water and sanitation within national development agendas and high-level policy discussions, particularly in contexts where these issues had previously received limited political attention.

- > **SDG 6 has provided a shared framework and reference point.** The existence of a dedicated global goal is seen as having helped to align actors across government, civil society, development partners and the private sector around common objectives and language. Several respondents noted SDG 6 offered legitimacy for water and sanitation issues within broader development planning processes, helping to justify inclusion in national strategies, sector plans and investment discussions.
- > **SDG 6 has contributed positively to policy development and institutional alignment, particularly at the national level.** Respondents cited the use of SDG 6 targets and indicators as reference points in the revision of national water and sanitation strategies, the formulation of action plans and the articulation of long-term sectoral goals.
- > **SDG 6 has helped to elevate sanitation as a political and development priority,** particularly through explicit targets on safely managed sanitation and hygiene. In several contexts, respondents described increased attention to ending open defecation and improving sanitation coverage as a meaningful shift associated with the SDG period, even if progress remains incomplete.
- > **SDG 6 indicators and reporting mechanisms have contributed to improved data collection and a clearer picture of water and sanitation service conditions.** While many respondents to the SDG 6 public consultation survey criticized limitations of the indicators in other parts of the survey, these same respondents nonetheless recognize that SDG 6 strengthened the evidence base and made disparities and service gaps more visible.
- > **SDG 6 has had a positive influence on partnerships and coordination.** Several respondents noted SDG 6 helped convene diverse stakeholders and foster dialogue

across institutions and sectors. Although these improvements are generally described as incremental rather than transformative, respondents nonetheless recognize SDG 6 as having facilitated engagement and collaboration that might otherwise have been more fragmented.

Importantly, the success narratives articulated by respondents tend to frame SDG 6 as an enabling or catalytic influence, rather than as a direct driver of service delivery outcomes. Positive assessments are typically associated with agenda setting, alignment and legitimacy, rather than with specific projects, investments or place-based results.

Perceived elements missing from SDG 6 and areas for improvement

The SDG 6 public consultation survey respondents identified a range of elements missing from SDG 6 or which should have been addressed differently. Across open-ended responses, several themes recur consistently and cut across regions and stakeholder groups. Private sector respondents provided the most critical responses about the implementation of SDG 6, but were equally supportive of a future water and sanitation goal beyond 2030 (see box 4.2):

- > **Financing and investment.** Respondents pointed to insufficient scale, predictability and alignment of financial resources, as well as limited domestic resource mobilization and weak links between ambition and financing mechanisms. Stakeholder feedback also highlighted persistent uncertainty regarding the investability of the water sector, including weak enabling environments, fragmented project pipelines, limited cost-recovery mechanisms and insufficient use of financial de-risking instruments. Many respondents also highlighted weaknesses in accountability and follow-through, including limited incentives or consequences associated with progress or lack thereof.

Box 4.2. Private sector perspectives from the SDG 6 public consultation survey

SDG 6 is widely used by the private sector as the benchmark for making business operations more sustainable. However, in the survey, private sector respondents comprised the stakeholder category most critical of the relevance of how the targets and indicators were formulated in terms of being useful to guide business performance. Some private sector respondents cited that in many countries, there was no clear business case for private sector engagement and highlighted more incentives and clearer signals to the private sector were needed for them to engage. Others indicated that the SDGs were too focused on targets and not enough on how to achieve them, noting there were insufficient links to implementation mechanisms and operational realities. Improved coordination between public and private sectors was highlighted as a missing element.

Source: UN-Water (2025d)

- > **Governance and fragmentation.** Respondents noted persistent sectoral silos and weak coordination across institutions and levels of government. These challenges were often linked to difficulties in translating global targets into coherent national and local action.
- > **Implementation and localization.** Respondents reported gaps between global ambition and local capacity, particularly at subnational levels. In addition, insufficient integration of climate risks, environmental sustainability and resilience was identified as a recurring concern, alongside challenges related to data and indicators, including the ability to capture equity, quality and long-term sustainability.

4.2 Water and sanitation beyond 2030 – stakeholders' perspectives

In forward-looking responses, the SDG 6 public consultation survey respondents articulated a consistent vision for water and sanitation beyond 2030. This vision emphasizes universal access framed as a human right, greater attention to sustainability and climate resilience, stronger accountability mechanisms, and more community-centred and locally owned approaches (see box 4.3). Respondents also repeatedly stressed the importance of integration across sectors and development priorities. The key messages from the SDG 6 public survey consultation are presented in box 4.4.

Box 4.3. Collective stakeholder vision for water and sanitation post-2030

In the United Nations development agenda after 2030 (when the SDGs will be finished), I would like to see water and sanitation...

"recognized as fundamental human rights, universally accessible, affordable and sustainable for all communities worldwide, fully integrated as a central pillar of climate resilience and social equity, and managed through community-led governance with stronger accountability to ensure no one is left behind."

Source: UN-Water (2025d)

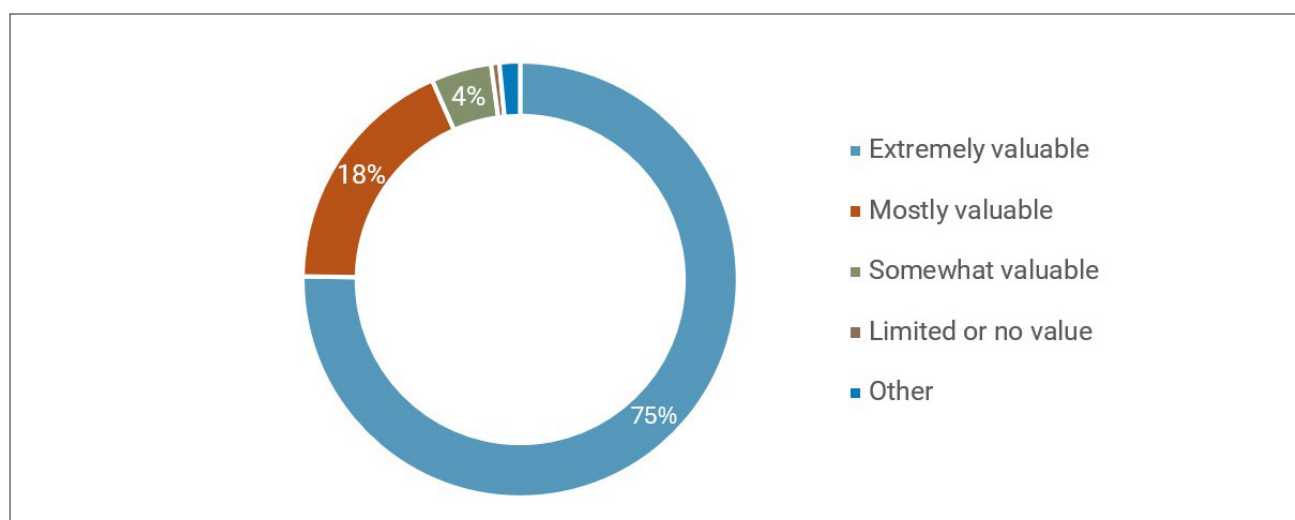


Figure 4.3. Will it be valuable to have a water and sanitation goal in the post-2030 framework?

Source: Data from the SDG 6 public consultation survey (UN-Water, 2025d)

Box 4.4. Key messages from stakeholders in the SDG 6 public consultation survey

Stakeholders responding to the survey:

- Valued SDG 6. Stakeholders valued SDG 6 for its political and normative contributions, particularly in raising visibility and aligning agendas. However, it was not widely perceived as transformative in terms of delivery, financing or outcomes.
- Found SDG 6 to be very useful. Stakeholders widely recognized SDG 6's catalytic positive influence on setting the agenda, providing a common reference point and bringing legitimacy to water and sanitation efforts at all levels. It helped to elevate water and sanitation as a political and development priority and to drive action towards SDG 6 targets.
- Perceived SDG 6 to be moderately impactful. Stakeholders perceived SDG 6 to have led to outcomes that are more incremental than transformative. Progress towards equity, partnerships and cross-sectoral integration were acknowledged, but largely characterized as incremental rather than systemic.
- Viewed SDG 6 as being partially achievable under current conditions. SDG 6 fell short of stakeholders' expectations of it being a direct driver of service delivery outcomes. Stakeholders cited insufficient scale, predictability and alignment of financial resources, as well as persistent sectoral silos and weak coordination across institutions and levels of government. These findings highlight the gaps between global ambition and local capacity. Private sector stakeholders indicated the business case for SDG 6 was often not clear and public-private sector coordination mechanisms are insufficient.
- Overwhelmingly supported a dedicated goal on water and sanitation beyond 2030. Stakeholders indicate overwhelming support for water and sanitation to continue as a goal in the post-2030 agenda. Overall, the findings do not reflect a rejection of SDG 6, but rather a call for it to be strengthened, better resourced and delivered differently.

Source: Data from the SDG 6 public consultation survey (UN-Water, 2025d)

Support for a future, dedicated water and sanitation goal is overwhelming

Over 90% of respondents to the SDG 6 public consultation survey indicated such a water and sanitation goal would be mostly or extremely valuable in the post-2030 framework (figure 4.3). Although the private sector was the most negative group in terms of SDG 6 value, responses on the value of water and sanitation in the post-2030 framework were closely aligned with the larger group: 70% extremely valuable, 17% mostly valuable and not a single “not valuable response”.

4.3 Voluntary commitments for SDG 6 and the Water Action Agenda

Voluntary commitments are another channel through which stakeholders have demonstrated their engagement and support for the implementation of SDG 6. The SDG Actions Platform, hosted by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), is a global registry of voluntary policies, commitments, multi-stakeholder partnerships and other initiatives made by governments, the UN system and a broad range of stakeholders to support acceleration of progress towards the SDGs (DESA, n.d.a). Governments and other actors are encouraged to register their policies, initiatives or commitments that accelerate the implementation of one or multiple SDGs. At the time of writing, there were 1,862 voluntary commitments registered for SDG 6 (DESA, n.d.a), including 846 Water Action Agenda commitments (DESA, n.d.b).

In 2024, DESA undertook mapping and assessment of progress towards the Water Action Agenda (DESA, 2024). The commitments stemmed from a diverse array of stakeholders including civil society organizations (36%), national governments (23%), academic institutions (11%) and the private sector (9%), spanning multiple regions with notable contributions from Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. This broad geographic and stakeholder diversity underscores the universal

recognition of water-related issues and the collective effort to address them. The commitments primarily align with SDG 6, with substantial emphasis also placed on SDGs pertaining to climate action, partnerships, life on land, health and sustainable cities. Furthermore, the financial commitments disclosed within the Water Action Agenda amount to an approximate total of \$77.2 billion, highlighting the considerable investment dedicated to achieving the set objectives (DESA, 2024).

The DESA mapping and assessment progress report had the following main findings (DESA, 2024):

- > A significant proportion of the Water Action Agenda commitments are in their nascent or intermediate stages of implementation. This revelation stems from a survey conducted among entities that have made commitments, which approximately a third of commitment holders responded to, providing insights into their progress, stakeholder involvement and implementation challenges.
- > Major hurdles such as financial constraints, lack of expertise, difficulties in fostering an enabling environment and cooperation issues emerge as significant barriers to the fulfilment of these commitments.
- > The commitments showcased in the report range widely in terms of financial scope and are aimed towards achieving mid- to long-term objectives, as revealed by the survey, which highlighted a pattern of funding distribution and preferred timelines across different types of organizations.

Periodic reviews of voluntary commitments for SDG 6 are a mechanism to maintain visibility and momentum to support the achievement of each commitment. Platforms such as the upcoming in-depth review of SDG 6 at the 2026 HLPF and the 2026 and 2028 UN conferences on water also provide opportunities to advance implementation and reporting on progress of existing commitments and making new commitments. In the context of the 2026 UN Water Conference, efforts are under way

to develop initiatives across the six themes of the interactive dialogues¹⁴ that aim to mobilize collective action to impactfully accelerate implementation of SDG 6. The UN General Assembly invited the Secretary-General to assess implementation of the Water Action Decade, for consideration at its eighty-first session, which can be another opportunity to take stock of progress on the Water Action Agenda and other water-related voluntary commitments (UN, General Assembly, 2023).

4.4 Ten years of UN system support to SDG 6 implementation

The UN system has actively supported the conception, development and delivery of SDG 6. In support of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs adopted by all UN Member States, the UN system committed to promote an integrated and coordinated approach to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In April 2016, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) endorsed a set of common principles to guide UN system actions (CEB, 2016).

Following adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, Member States requested the Secretary-General to carry out a system-wide review of functions and capacities of the UN development system to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UN, General Assembly, 2016). The 2017 Dalberg report presented a system-wide outline of functions and capabilities of the UN development system (Dalberg, 2017). It highlighted a gap for water and sanitation (SDG 6) – especially for water resources management and water-use efficiency. In 2016, UN entities' combined spending on water and sanitation represented only 3% of total UN development system expenditure. A clear functional gap was noted around normative work. This effort

fed into the 2018 reform of the UN development system to re-invigorate the Resident Coordinator system and enhance the work of UN country teams.

Starting from this baseline, the UN system built on decades of experience of water and sanitation programming to respond to the new requirements to support implementation of SDG 6. In 2024–2025, it was estimated that the UN system supported water and sanitation programmes in over 111 countries¹⁵

This decade of experience implementing SDG 6 has resulted in significant strengthening of UN system-wide coordination of water and sanitation priorities. These efforts have been enhanced through mandates from Member States to prepare a UN system-wide water and sanitation strategy through the adoption of resolution 77/334 (UN, General Assembly, 2023), and to strengthen actions to accelerate progress on SDG 6 through the 2024 quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR) resolution 79/226, paragraph 28 (UN, General Assembly, 2024b). The QCPR is a main policy instrument of the UN General Assembly to guide how the UN development system supports countries (see box 4.5).

This section examines five key areas where the UN system has supported SDG 6 implementation with a focus on updates since the previous edition of the UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation (UN, 2023a). It highlights how a dedicated water and sanitation goal (SDG 6) and coordinated support to its implementation through UN-Water has contributed to strengthening UN system-wide efforts on water and sanitation.

Global monitoring and reporting for water and sanitation

The adoption of the global indicator framework (UN, General Assembly, 2017) led to the designation of custodian entities accountable for the global monitoring of and reporting for each SDG indicator. UN-Water established IMI-SDG6 in 2015, at the beginning of the 2030 Agenda, to bring together

¹⁴ The UN General Assembly decided on the following six themes for the interactive dialogues of the 2026 UN Water Conference : (a) water for people, (b) water for prosperity, (c) water for planet, (d) water for cooperation, (e) water in multilateral processes and (f) investments for water (UN, General Assembly, 2025a).

¹⁵ A 2025 analysis by the UN Development Coordination Office found water was referred to in 89% (111 total) of UN Cooperation Framework Joint Work Plans.

the UN organizations that are custodians of the various SDG 6 global indicators. IMI-SDG6 builds on other data initiatives, such as:

- > JMP (WHO and UNICEF)
- > Wastewater questionnaires (UN Statistics Division, UNEP and OECD)
- > Global Environment Monitoring System for Water (UNEP)
- > AQUASTAT (FAO)
- > Status report on IWRM (UNEP)
- > Reporting under the Water Convention (UNECE)
- > Freshwater Ecosystems Explorer (UNEP)
- > GLAAS (WHO and UNICEF)
- > Transboundary Aquifers of the World (International Groundwater Resources Assessment Centre and UNESCO)
- > Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database (Oregon State University)

The overarching goal of IMI-SDG6 is to accelerate the achievement of SDG 6, by increasing the availability of high-quality data for evidence-based policymaking, regulations, planning and investments at all levels. IMI-SDG6 supports countries to collect, analyse and report SDG 6 data, as well as policymakers and decision makers at all levels, to use these data in a holistic manner. Since 2015, IMI-SDG6 has coordinated three data drives and reporting cycles. The fourth data drive cycle is under way.

Overall, countries have valued this coordinated approach to support national monitoring and reporting on SDG 6. The Mid-term External Review of the IMI-SDG6 – Phase 3 found that over 77% of country focal points acknowledged that IMI-SDG6 has contributed to their country’s progress towards achieving SDG 6, with more than 20% indicating IMI-SDG6 has contributed to a “great extent” (Hydroconseil, 2026a). As shown in figure 4.4, the top five responses on how IMI-SDG6 has contributed to countries’ progress towards achieving SDG 6 are: strengthened data collection and reporting (69%), improved cross-sectoral coordination (52%), enhanced capacity and awareness (49%), improved use of data (48%) and policy or planning influence (44%) (Hydroconseil, 2026a).

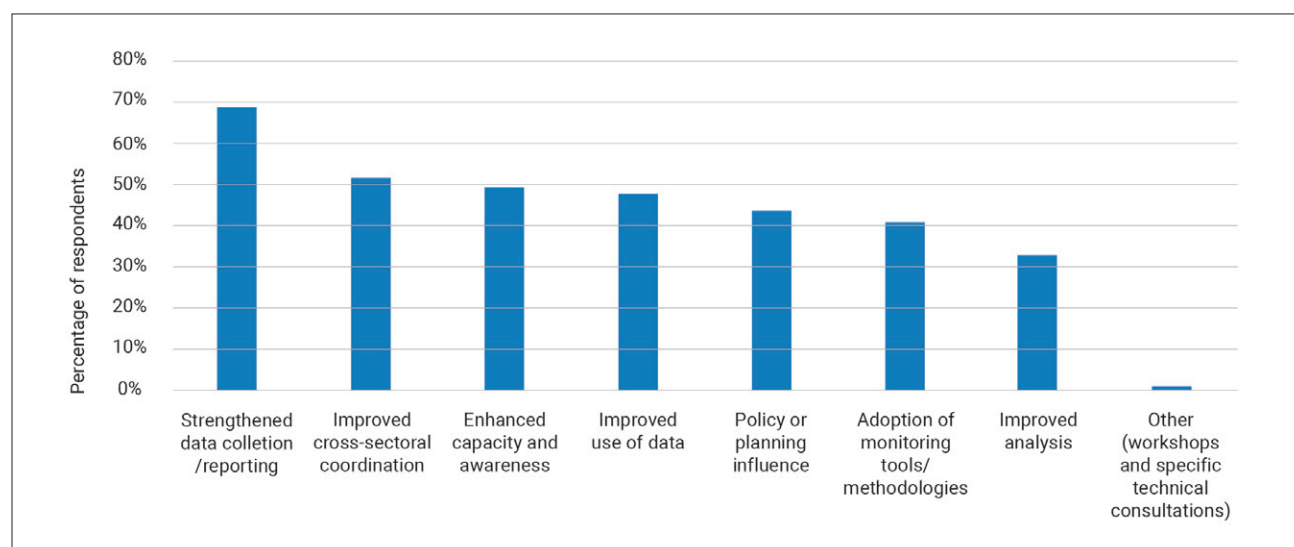


Figure 4.4. IMI-SDG6 main contributions to countries’ progress towards achieving SDG 6

Source: Data from 151 replies to the IMI-SDG6 Mid-term Review Survey (Hydroconseil, 2026a)

Coordination of water and sanitation priorities

While the UN-Water inter-agency coordination mechanism predated the 2030 Agenda, the adoption of a dedicated goal for water and sanitation elevated the importance of coordination between UN entities and international partners. With over 36 UN entities carrying out water and sanitation programming as part of the mandates, coordination has been critical to maximize synergies and reduce gaps and overlaps. The core pillar of UN system coordination on water and sanitation issues has been through the UN-Water mechanism of biannual meetings and regular programmes of expert groups and task forces.

Coordination of water and sanitation within the UN system and wider international community has been reinforced through UN-Water's support to the Water Action Decade through the development of the UN Secretary-General's Action Plan (UN, 2021) and subsequently the midterm review of the Water Action Decade, which culminated in the UN 2023 Water Conference as well as through the development and operationalization of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework (UN-Water, 2020a). Launched in 2020 as a part of the Secretary-General's Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs by 2030, the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework has mobilized UN agencies, governments, civil society, private sector and other stakeholders around five cross-cutting and interdependent accelerators: financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation and governance (UN-Water, 2020a).

The UN General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to present a UN system-wide water and sanitation strategy in resolution 77/334 (UN, General Assembly, 2023). UN-Water duly prepared the

System-wide Strategy, under the leadership of its Chair, and the CEB endorsed it in May 2024 (CEB, 2024; and UN-Water, 2024d). It provides a system-wide approach for UN entities to work collaboratively on water and sanitation – not as a sector in a silo, but holistically to address the interrelated cross-sectoral aspects of water and sanitation. Its goal is to enhance UN system-wide coordination and delivery of water and sanitation priorities in support of countries to accelerate progress on national plans and priorities, internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, realization of human rights, and transformative solutions to current and future challenges for the benefit of all people and the planet. It aims to fully operationalize inter-agency coordination, capitalize on reforms of the United Nations development system, and leverage upscaled water and sanitation action of UN entities to provide more strategic, effective, coherent and efficient support to Member States.

To support the implementation and operationalization of the UN System-wide Strategy, UN-Water prepared a Collaborative Implementation Plan. Covering the period 2025–2028, the implementation plan identifies shared priorities and actions to strengthen coordination, align agency workplans, and deliver more coherent and effective support to Member States (UN-Water, 2025b). It contains six priority collaborative actions that the UN system is working on delivering together through UN-Water coordination, as well as 150 contributing actions that UN entities are implementing individually and jointly (see figure 4.5). The UN System-wide Strategy and its implementation plan have enabled the UN system to shift from coordination towards collaboration, and put it on a path towards enhanced joint delivery.

UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM-WIDE STRATEGY FOR WATER AND SANITATION

A unified, system-wide approach to solving water and sanitation challenges

COLLABORATIVE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2025-2028

Turning the Strategy into collective, impactful actions

Two action streams:

PRIORITY COLLABORATIVE ACTIONS

Six impact areas for the UN system and its partners to work on together to drive progress on water and sanitation

PCA 1.1: Unify and amplify UN voices on water and sanitation

PCA 1.2: Water beyond 2030

PCA 2: Collaborate for joint country programming

PCA 3: Mainstream within UN Rio Conventions at all levels

PCA 4: Improve availability and use of evidence and learning to accelerate progress

PCA 5: Mobilize to elevate the ambition of UN Water Conferences

CONTRIBUTING ACTIONS

Individual or joint actions by UN entities and partners within their respective mandates and workstreams

150+ actions mapped across mandates and workstreams

Span **all five Entry Points** of the Strategy

Reflect **diverse approaches** – from global advocacy to local implementation

Reflect **diverse themes** – climate resilience, gender equality, innovation and technology, data, monitoring and learning, or human rights and governance

Figure 4.5. Structure of UN System-wide Strategy and its Collaborative Implementation Plan: turning strategy into action

Source: UN-Water (2025b)

UN system leadership

As there is no single UN agency, fund or programme dedicated exclusively to water issues, leadership on water and sanitation issues is delegated by the CEB to a high-level UN-Water Chair at Principal level. To coordinate implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy, in 2023 the UN-Water Chair established regular meetings with the UN-Water Principals to provide UN senior leadership-level strategic guidance on the System-wide Strategy and periodically review progress on its implementation.

The Secretary-General appointed the first Special Envoy on Water in late 2024, to help galvanize partnerships and make concerted efforts to advance the water agenda. She serves as a champion and high-level advocate on water and sanitation issues, raising water issues high on the political agenda within and outside the UN, convening stakeholders across the spectrum, amplifying the work of the UN system, and mobilizing action and financial resources to address the global water crisis (DESA, n.d.c).

In late 2024, the UN General Assembly elevated SDG 6 as a UN development system priority through the 2024 QCPR resolution 79/226, paragraph 28 (see box 4.5). This mandate facilitated the incorporation of a water and sanitation indicator into the QCPR monitoring framework – an important accountability mechanism and reporting tool for the UN development system.

Integrated policy advice and capacity development support

Over the past 10 years, UN entities and their partners have made significant contributions to support SDG 6 implementation within their mandated areas. These include preparing technical and normative guidance, providing technical assistance, building local capacity, supporting implementation of projects, documenting field experiences, and developing training materials and courses.

UN-Water has coordinated joint UN system efforts in the following areas:

Box 4.5. Water and sanitation in the 2024 quadrennial comprehensive policy review resolution

Stakeholders responding to the survey:

The quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR) is the mechanism through which the UN General Assembly assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and impact of UN operational activities for development. The QCPR is the primary policy instrument of the General Assembly to define the way the UN development system operates to support programme countries in their development efforts.

Water and sanitation are included in the 2024 QCPR resolution 79/226, in paragraph 28:

28. Also requests the United Nations development system to strengthen actions to accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal 6 in programme countries, upon request, in line with national priorities, needs and plans, acknowledging that water and sanitation are critical for sustainable development and the eradication of poverty;

The 2024 QCPR will guide the UN development system over the four-year period 2025–2028, the last full cycle before the 2030 SDG deadline. This request from Member States is an important opportunity for greater prioritization and upscaling of the UN system's work to support acceleration of SDG 6 through the implementation of the Strategy over the next four years.

Source: ECOSOC (n.d.); UN, General Assembly (2024b); adapted from UN-Water (2025b)

- > **Preparation of detailed policy and analytical briefs addressing the most pressing water-related issues.** that draw upon the combined expertise of the UN system. Recent topics include: water for climate mitigation, gender spotlight on SDG 6, water-use efficiency, global water conventions fostering sustainable development and peace, and unconventional water resources (UN-Water, n.d.d).
- > **Annual World Water Day and World Toilet Day observances.** The UN system has continued collaboration on the annual United Nations World Water Development Report aligned with the World Water Day theme. Since 2023, the World Water Day topics have been Leveraging Water for Peace (2024), Glacier Preservation (2025) and Water and Gender (2026) (UN-Water, n.d.e).
- > **UN-Water SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative activities** in Costa Rica, Gambia and Jordan to support the development and implementation of national capacity-development plans, aligning UN system support behind national priorities (UN-Water, n.d.f).

UN country programming support – towards enhanced joint delivery

The UN system has a vast footprint of water and sanitation programming at country level that is implemented through United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks signed between governments and the UN system, represented by UN Resident Coordinators.¹⁶

The Mid-term External Review of the UN-Water 2030 Strategy highlighted there has been significant progress in developing durable institutional structures and processes within UN system governance that support improved coordination of the UN system's work on water and sanitation (Hydroconseil, 2026b). However, it also identified the need for greater efforts to upscale and embed the implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy within UN country teams and regional

¹⁶ A 2025 analysis by the UN Development Coordination Office found water was referred to in 89% (111 total) of UN Cooperation Framework Joint Work Plans, of which 88% of LDCs/LLDCs were covered, while 84% were low-income countries and lower-middle-income countries and 24% of all SIDS. However, only about one fifth of the Cooperation Framework Joint Work Plans included United Nations Sustainable Development Group Output Indicators relating to SDG 6 and only about 9% of UN country teams have formalized joint programmes that relate thematically to "water".

Box 4.6. Mid-term External Review of the UN-Water 2030 Strategy – key conclusions at a glance

Stakeholders responding to the survey:

The 2020–2030 UN-Water Strategy (UN-Water, 2020b) remains conceptually sound and strategically relevant to the evolving global agenda, offering a coherent framework that anticipated many priorities later enshrined in UN General Assembly resolution 77/334 and the UN System-wide Strategy: Over the 2020–2025 period, UN-Water has matured institutionally: its governance structure, technical capacity and collaborative mechanisms have become more systematic, although still constrained by limited resources and voluntary participation.

- The UN-Water Strategy's collective results are strongest at the global level – notably in knowledge production, joint monitoring and advocacy – while operational reach and country engagement remain embryonic.
- UN-Water's added value lies in its convening power and neutrality: it provides coherence and credibility to the UN system's water and sanitation voice but does not yet fully translate this leadership into system-wide implementation.
- The current phase (2025–2030) must consolidate the transition from coordination to delivery, anchoring the UN System-wide Strategy operationally within UN country teams, strengthening financing predictability and institutionalizing capacity-development functions for long-term sustainability.

Source: Adapted from Hydroconseil (2026b)

commissions (see box 4.6). Regional commissions play a crucial role in translating global commitments and guidelines into regional priorities, supporting Resident Coordinators and UN country teams in mainstreaming relevant water and sanitation issues into their country planning and exchanging experiences on this, for example through the regional coordination platforms or issue-based coalitions.

At country level, some Resident Coordinators and UN country teams have acted to strengthen their system-wide coordination and integration of water-related issues. Coordination and system-wide approaches have been reinforced through regional mechanisms such as the Issue-based Coalitions on the Environment and Climate Change in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and on Climate Change and Resilience for Latin America and the Caribbean, and more broadly through the regional sustainable development forums convened by the regional commissions.

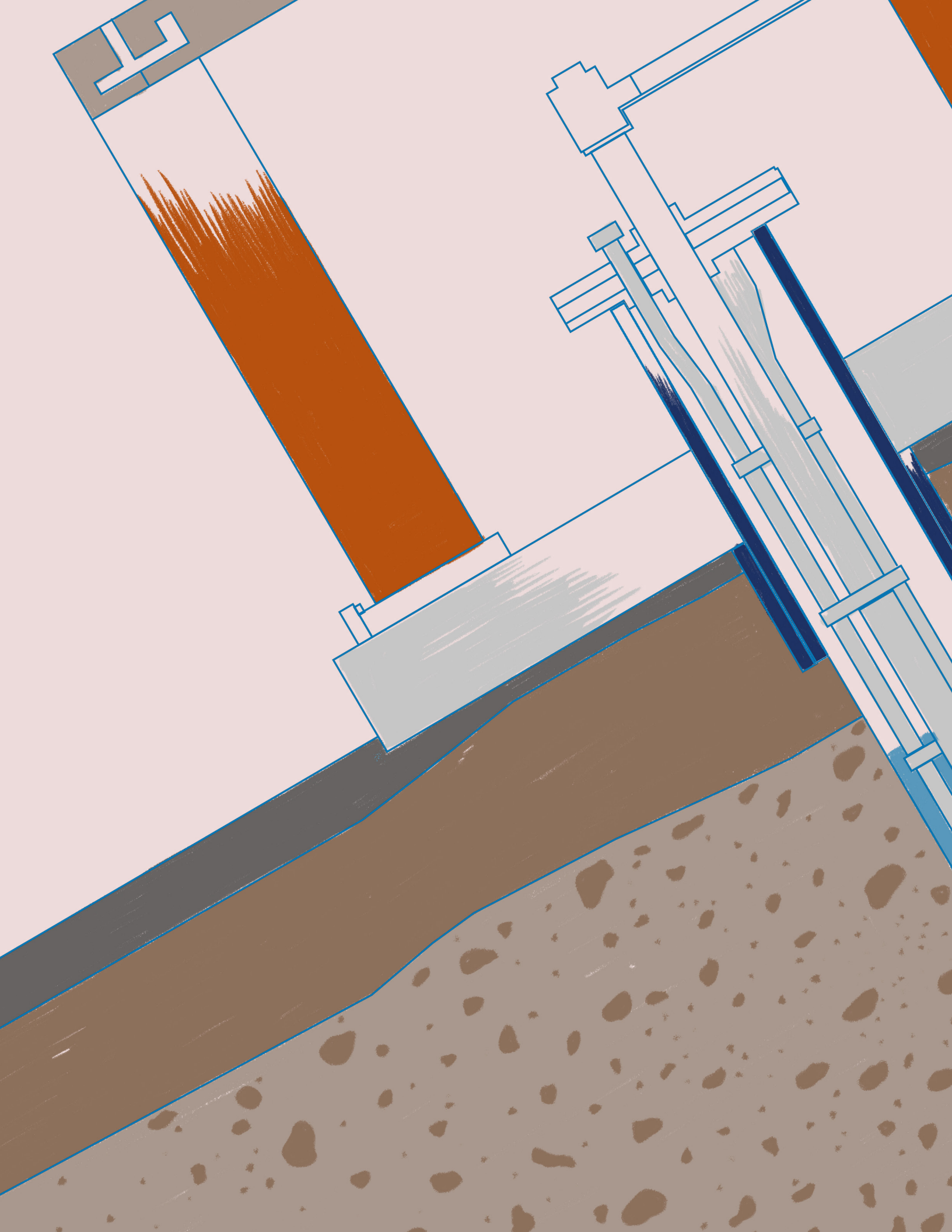
To support operationalization of the UN System-wide Strategy, UN-Water is collaborating with the UN Development Coordination Office, at the global level and its five regional offices. The aim is to increase understanding and mobilization of Resident Coordinators and UN country teams on water and sanitation. Through peer-to-peer exchanges, coupled with technical and financial support to integrate water in country-level planning, programming and coordination frameworks, Resident Coordinators and UN country teams are supported in their mission to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. As part of this effort, the Development Coordination Office and UN-Water prepared a joint paper for Resident Coordinators/UN country teams that presents a “systems-thinking approach” to water for SDG progress using the five SDG 6 global accelerators and explores the interlinkages between water and major SDG transitions (UN-Water and UN Development Coordination Office, 2025) (see section 5.2).

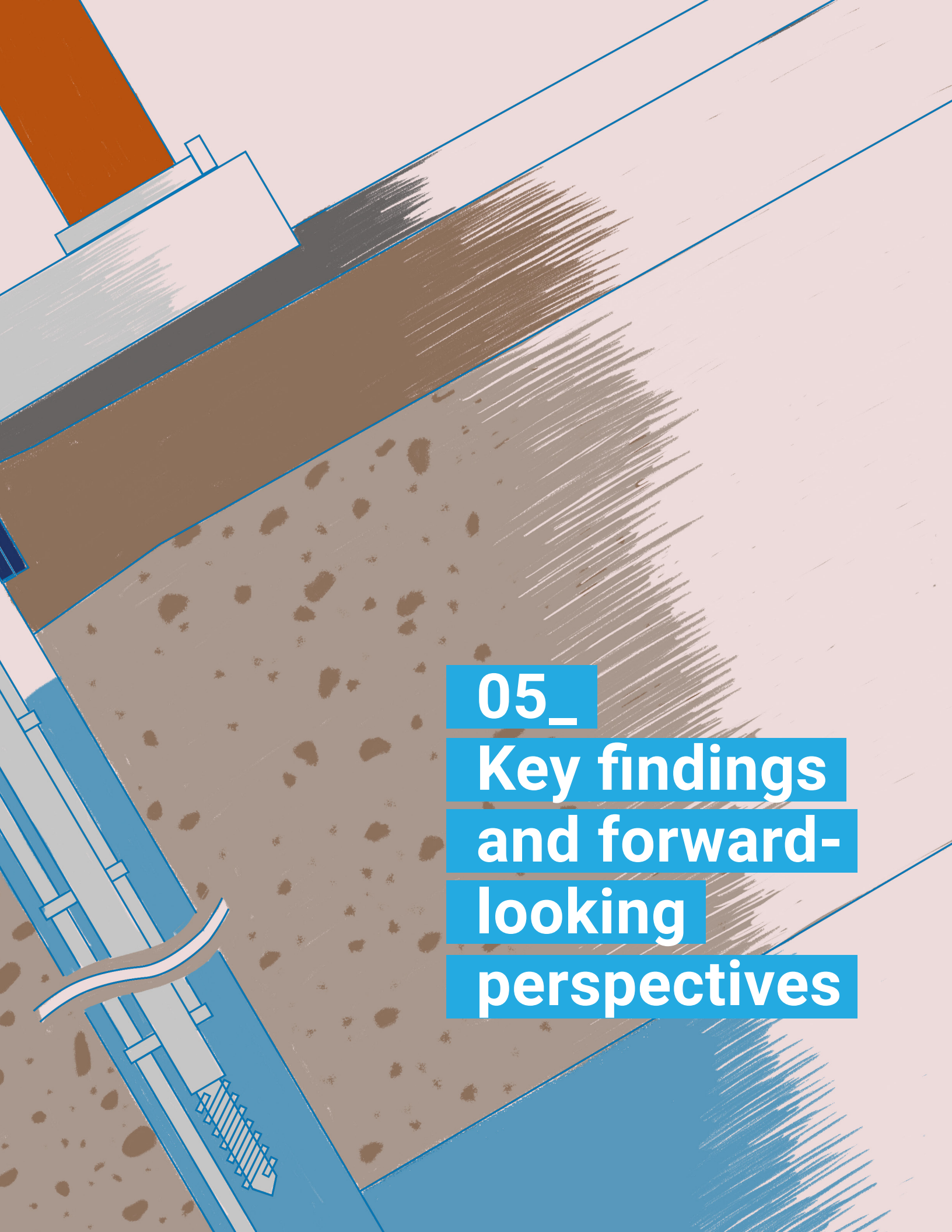
UN-Water is conducting an assessment to examine how UN country teams and Resident Coordinator Offices are integrating water and sanitation in their country analyses, cooperation frameworks

and coordination structures. Preliminary findings have identified good practices and key success factors, as well as the need for more frequent peer-to-peer exchanges among Resident Coordinators and UN country teams. This assessment, to be published in late 2026 and accompanied by a compilation of some of the good practices, will showcase a range of schemes available to improve UN inter-agency coordination on water issues. It will provide examples of how working across agency mandates can unlock significant opportunities to accelerate progress, not just towards SDG 6 but across the whole 2030 Agenda.

Towards 2030 and beyond, there is a valuable opportunity to strengthen UN country programming, notably connecting planning and programming to resourcing and implementation. In comparison to other UN programming areas, there have been few “joint programmes” on water and sanitation. Additionally, UN joint country programmes on areas closely related to water, such as food systems transformation, often lack a water component. Developing joint UN country programmes on water and sanitation, as well as incorporating components to address water- and sanitation-related issues in relevant existing joint programmes, can be an opportunity to advance stronger integration of water and sanitation into UN country programming, achieve multiple benefits beyond water and sanitation such as improved health, climate adaptation or food security, and leverage UN system technical expertise and resources across mandates in support of country-level plans, priorities and needs.

As the UN System-wide Strategy and its implementation plan are translated into action on the ground, now is a pivotal juncture to leverage enhanced coordination for greater inter-agency joint delivery of tangible country outcomes and drive system-wide results for SDG 6 and beyond.





05_

**Key findings
and forward-
looking
perspectives**

This chapter presents the key findings from 10 years of implementation of SDG 6, explores the changes in the global landscape and their impacts on water and sanitation, and offers forward-looking perspectives towards 2030 and beyond.

Over the past decade, the world has taken unprecedented steps to understand and manage its water and sanitation resources.

Ten years on, the results are tangible. Billions more people can access safer drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene services; water-use efficiency has improved; and countries are applying IWRM to balance competing needs for people, economies and nature. SDG 6 has ignited a historic global effort to measure, manage and improve water and sanitation. While progress has not been uniform, the overall direction of travel is positive. The latest data show acceleration is under way for several SDG 6 indicators, with more countries achieving measurable year-on-year improvements than in the first years of implementation. In absolute terms, the gains are large: *fewer people are left behind, and water management systems are stronger than they were a decade ago.*

Specific areas of stagnation, declining trends and data gaps are known. Improved data availability and global reporting provide an increasingly clear picture of SDG 6-related status and trends by indicator, region and country, and increasingly by basin. Several areas show limited improvement or persistent challenges that require urgent attention. Water stress remains critically high in several regions – Northern Africa and Western Asia subregions show worsening trends with additional hotspots in Central and Southern Asia. A global estimate of treated industrial wastewater flows is not feasible due to under-reporting. Global coverage of operational arrangements for transboundary water cooperation has expanded only modestly since 2015. Data availability on groundwater quality and quantity is improving, but remains limited. The percentage of basins with a negative trend in annual minimum river flow has increased in all SDG regions. *Decline and*

stagnation in specific SDG 6 indicator areas highlights the need to address persistent gaps in data, capacity, finance, governance systems and implementation.

Recent trends indicate accelerating progress for selected SDG 6 indicators in some countries and regions. While these acceleration trends are not universal, they signal areas where strengthened implementation, monitoring and institutional capacity may contribute to faster gains. Country and regional examples are encouraging and impressive, demonstrating progress is possible across regions and at all income levels, although not yet at the scale required globally, and with inequalities persisting within and among countries. This progress has occurred against a backdrop of increasing water-related challenges from population growth, increasing water demand across sectors and greater pressures on freshwater ecosystems. By 2030, projections indicate partial attainment of some SDG 6 subtargets in certain regions. Further projections based on current implementation rates provide a mixed but instructive picture: some subtargets could be achieved by 2030 in some regions, while others would require a longer time horizon. *Extending projections to 2045–2050 suggests that full realization of most SDG 6 targets is achievable if acceleration is sustained.*

5.1 Key findings

After 10 years, implementation of SDG 6 has:

1. Elevated water and sanitation as a political priority at all levels

SDG 6 has elevated water and sanitation as a priority on global, regional and national development agendas. As one of the 17 SDGs, it has been embraced and localized into political commitments, national systems, stakeholder strategies and public consciousness. It has provided an internationally agreed reference for collective action on water and sanitation – globally and locally. Stakeholders appreciate the catalytic positive influence of

SDG 6 in setting the global agenda, providing a common reference point and bringing legitimacy to water and sanitation efforts at all levels.

As part of the broader UN sustainable development framework, the implementation of SDG 6 has benefited from the intergovernmental processes and mechanisms for periodic monitoring and review established for the 2030 Agenda. The HLPF in-depth reviews of SDG 6 and annual SDG 6 Special Events have provided dedicated opportunities for the international community to take stock of progress, exchange experiences and discuss recommendations. The proclamation of the period 2018–2028 by the UN General Assembly as the Water Action Decade has complemented SDG 6 by galvanizing political support and elevating water as a cross-cutting priority on the international agenda. The decisions by the UN General Assembly to convene three UN conferences on water in 2023, 2026 and 2028 has significantly increased the frequency of intergovernmental dialogue on water at the UN.

SDG 6 and the Water Action Decade have provided Members States, the UN system and stakeholders with an internationally agreed global water goal and targets, a set of objectives to promote water management across the broader 2030 Agenda, a platform for global policy dialogue on water at the UN, platforms for voluntary commitments and a process for periodic monitoring and review. This experience underscores the importance of having a dedicated goal for water and sanitation that covers the whole water cycle, supported by political momentum and global dialogue on water through UN intergovernmental processes, including UN meetings and conferences.

2. Shaped policy development, fostered harmonization and inspired innovative approaches

The uptake of SDG 6 by many countries into national systems has influenced policy direction, national target setting, service levels and institutional arrangements. Global monitoring

and reporting have prompted the need for aligned definitions, harmonized technical standards and feasible methodologies suitable across diverse country contexts. SDG 6 has built a common understanding of water and sanitation within and across countries, and enabled countries to strengthen national monitoring systems to fill data gaps. It has facilitated global and regional support programmes and fostered peer-to-peer learning that have contributed to developing national and local capacities. To overcome challenges, SDG 6 has inspired innovative solutions at scale, from non-conventional water resources and water-smart agriculture, to practical applications of Earth observation and citizen science, to re-invented toilets and portable handwashing devices.

SDG 6 has driven policy reform and provided a useful framework for countries and stakeholders to work on water and sanitation issues with a more coherent, collaborative, integrated and innovative approach at all levels.

3. Provided an entry point for strengthened coordination and cooperation across sectors and levels

Since the adoption of SDG 6, more countries now have the laws, policies, institutions and plans needed for coordinated water management than a decade ago, even if their practical implementation still lags. Accession to and implementation of the Water Convention and the Watercourses Convention has helped to accelerate progress on transboundary cooperation.

SDG 6 has increasingly provided an entry point for mainstreaming water within and across intergovernmental processes via integrated national commitments and plans alongside compatible monitoring indicators, including those for climate adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity, drought, health, agrifood and disaster risk reduction. For example, existing SDG 6 indicators already capture key dimensions of service access, water resources management and water quality, offering a strong empirical foundation upon which climate resilience

metrics can be built and scaled. While much remains to be done, important initial steps have been taken to improve coherence on how water-related issues are addressed across sectors. Fragmentation of institutions and sectors and silo thinking remain a major barrier, although important strides in progress have been made. Many countries still report that effective coordination remains a challenge and a process of continual improvement. Among competing socioeconomic priorities, there can be challenges for ministries of water and environment to effectively lead cross-sector coordination.

Enhancing the impact of water-related progress as a driver of SDG acceleration across sectors relies on strengthened cross-sectoral coordination and decision-making. With agriculture accounting for 72% of global freshwater withdrawals and a main contributor to water stress at the global level, integrated land-use planning, IWRM, the water–energy–food–ecosystem nexus, and the agrifood systems approach and other sustainable and integrated approaches are essential to address the climate, land, soil, water and biodiversity crises (FAO, 2025). Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination and decision-making and use of integrated approaches to water and sanitation can help countries to: increase policy coherence; improve management, allocation and use; secure shared benefits; and manage trade-offs.

4. Been constrained by under-resourcing – progress depends on strong systems, capacity and investment

Strong systems and capacity for SDG 6 delivery are prerequisites for more scalable and sustainable water and sanitation investments and leaving no one behind. As highlighted in Chapter 3, the implementation of many SDG 6 targets has revealed persistent gaps in institutional and human resources capacity, weaknesses in regulatory frameworks, inefficiencies in operational performance, and insufficient revenue-raising and cost-recovery arrangements. Financial investment in water and sanitation remains low due to systemic weaknesses and binding constraints. An increasing number of

countries are tracking finance flows for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services using tools such as TrackFin and WASH accounts, to gain a clearer picture of how resources are allocated and spent and to identify financing gaps (WHO and UNICEF, 2025b). However, systematically quantifying and tracking the global needs and gaps for financing, institutional and human resources capacity, and governance systems across all SDG 6 targets have proved challenging. Despite the well-documented economic case for water investment, the sector remains undervalued and underpriced. Water tariffs in many countries do not reflect the full cost of provision, creating structural dependence on public subsidies and making investment vulnerable to fiscal and political cycles.

Systems strengthening approaches that increase efficiencies and improve performance can help scale financing for water and sanitation across all SDG 6 targets. Addressing these constraints will require a transition from fragmented project financing towards a system-oriented financial architecture for water. Such an approach combines domestic public finance, ODA, climate finance and commercial capital through structured risk-sharing mechanisms while maintaining affordability, equity and public oversight. In this context, strengthening institutions, improving utility performance, developing capacity, developing bankable project pipelines and enhancing monitoring systems are not peripheral reforms but foundational conditions for mobilizing investment at scale.

Improving monitoring of systems indicators pertaining to the means of implementation – policies, institutions, regulations, human resources, finance and equity – across SDG 6 targets can help countries better link implementation and outcomes. Better tracking of finance and use of data can improve spending efficiency and effectiveness, as well as targeting of resources to systematically close equity gaps and reach areas most vulnerable to climate change impacts and other risks. High-level initiatives that align political will and national plans with international cooperation, capacity development and financing

are showing promising signs. The upcoming 2026 UN Water Conference will be a vital occasion to galvanize political will and partnership to overcome such barriers to accelerate implementation.

5. Catalysed stakeholder action and generated strong support for a dedicated water and sanitation goal beyond 2030

From its inception, stakeholders have played a critical role in the development and implementation of SDG 6. Stakeholders have engaged in policy dialogue at global, regional, national and subnational levels, and have actively supported translating SDG 6 targets into action on the ground. Based on the SDG 6 public consultation survey for this report, stakeholders perceive SDG 6 as being very useful and moderately impactful, but only partially achievable under current conditions. Stakeholders particularly value SDG 6 for its role in achieving political commitment and driving action. SDG 6 has contributed to increased dialogue, coordination and interaction among actors. At the same time, its implementation is perceived as more incremental rather than systemic in terms of delivery, financing and achievement of outcomes. Some private sector respondents noted that the business case for SDG 6 was often not clear, and public-private sector coordination mechanisms are insufficient. This highlights the distinction between the conceptual and political value of SDG 6 and the practical feasibility of achieving its targets given current constraints. The survey respondents showed overwhelming support among all stakeholder groups for water and sanitation to continue as a dedicated goal in the post-2030 agenda.

SDG 6 has garnered a significant number of voluntary commitments through the SDG Actions Platform and the Water Action Agenda, which demonstrate diverse multi-stakeholder efforts. However, it is difficult to assess the level of implementation of many commitments. Periodic reviews of voluntary commitments for SDG 6 are one mechanism that could help to maintain visibility and momentum to support the achievement of each commitment. The forthcoming

UN conferences on water in 2026 and 2028 provide the opportunity to promote implementation and take stock of progress of voluntary commitments.

6. Strengthened UN system-wide coordination and delivery of water and sanitation priorities

In response to SDG 6, the UN system has substantially scaled up coordinated efforts on water and sanitation across mandates and at all levels. Inter-agency coordination through UN-Water, global monitoring and reporting supported by IMI-SDG6, the System-wide Strategy, the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, the Secretary-General's Plan for the Water Action Decade, the appointment of the Special Envoy on Water, alongside the mandates from the General Assembly for three UN conferences on water and the 2024 QCPR have enhanced UN system efforts on water and sanitation. The Collaborative Implementation Plan prepared by UN-Water to operationalize the UN System-wide Strategy offers a joint workplan for six priority collaborative actions, which demonstrates in practice how expertise and resources can be leveraged across the system to deliver coherent, tangible results. The coordinated effort between UN-Water, the UN Development Coordination Office and the UN regional commissions¹⁷ to support localization of the UN System-wide Strategy through engagement with the UN Resident Coordinators and UN country teams and catalytic seed funding are already showing great potential to enhance agile, joint delivery of support to programme countries based on national priorities, needs and plans at scale. Establishment of regular meetings of the UN-Water Principals has facilitated system-wide leadership and strategic guidance on water and sanitation priorities across UN system mandates.

Ten years of implementation have delivered progress that is real and measurable, but not yet sufficient to meet the full ambition of SDG 6. While the Goal has been effective

¹⁷ The five UN regional commissions are members of UN-Water. They are co-convenors of this joint effort with Development Coordination Office regional offices to fully leverage UN regional level capacity, process and political leadership to support countries in their respective regions.

in mobilizing action and shaping global and national agendas, experience over the past decade shows that goals, targets and indicators alone are not enough – progress has depended on the alignment of institutional frameworks, operational capacity and financial resources, which has remained uneven across contexts.

With less than five years remaining until 2030, there is an urgent need for stronger alignment of political commitments and targets with implementation capacity and investment to increase the speed and scale of progress. Moving from incremental and uneven progress to transformative change will require maintaining “what is working” while making improvements to the systems, means and processes required to implement SDG 6 better going forward.

5.2 SDG 6 in a changing global landscape

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, significant shifts in the global context are reshaping the scale, nature and interconnections of water- and sanitation-related challenges. This section examines various factors affecting current water and sanitation issues and future perspectives to better understand some of the emerging opportunities and possible constraints for SDG 6 implementation now and in the years ahead.

Advances in science, technology and innovation

Science, technology and innovation are key levers for transforming water and sanitation systems, and for accelerating progress towards SDG 6. New evidence and scientific findings are shaping understanding of current and future water challenges. SDG 6 has inspired innovation, and significant advances in new technologies are helping to overcome barriers that have historically slowed progress.

Since the adoption of the SDGs, the latest scientific evidence indicates the Earth’s water cycle is changing. The global water cycle is responding to climate change: global warming is accelerating, amplifying and intensifying water cycle processes, leading to more intense wet and dry extremes (Allan and others, 2020; Van Dijk and others, 2022). There has been increased understanding of the importance of “green water” (water stored as soil moisture and in vegetation) and the role of terrestrial moisture flows that interlink source and sink areas through the hydrological cycle, including how deforestation, agricultural and urban expansion can disrupt rainfall patterns (Global Commission on the Economics of Water, 2024). There is new analysis that shows “continental drying” (long-term decline in freshwater availability across large landmasses) is taking place. Global warming, worsening droughts and unsustainable land and water use are major contributors to this trend (Zhang and others, 2025). Accelerated melting of glaciers and the broader cryosphere has also garnered international attention. The year 2024 was the third consecutive year in which widespread ice loss was recorded across all glaciated regions, with 450 gigatons of ice lost – equivalent to 1.2 mm of sea-level rise (WMO, 2025). This is alarming because billions of people rely directly on water originating from mountains for their drinking water, sanitation and livelihoods (UN, 2025b). It is therefore increasingly difficult to forecast and predict how the future will look, let alone prepare for such unprecedented scenarios.

Human activities such as unsustainable land management and ecosystem degradation are exacerbating global water challenges. Levels of groundwater use are unprecedented (UN, 2022; UN-Water, 2022d). Aquifer degradation from overexploitation, pollution, salination and subsidence is hindering safe water access and economic development in many regions (UN, 2022). A global aggregated analysis of water-related ecosystem data shows that 50% of countries reporting on indicator 6.6.1

have one or more water-related ecosystem types in a state of degradation for the five-year observation period 2017–2021 (UNEP, 2024c).

Wetlands, including rivers and lakes, are the most transformed and degraded ecosystem type. They have lost about 400 million hectares since 1970 (i.e. 22% of their area), with nearly a quarter of those remaining in a degraded state (Convention on Wetlands, 2025). There is emerging evidence of systemic water overuse in some highly water-stressed regions causing irreversible ecosystem and socioeconomic damage – termed a state of “water bankruptcy” in a recent report (Madani, 2026). Taken together, these changes in global water-related trends have cascading effects on economies, ecosystems, biodiversity and societies (UN, 2023b).

Technological advances are offering new opportunities to improve water availability and quality, increase water-use efficiency and productivity, reduce water stress through non-conventional water resources and improve service delivery performance, as well as increase resilience to climate variability. For example, since the SDGs were adopted, investment in desalination has risen strongly, and growth is expected to continue to 2030 and beyond (Global Water Intelligence, 2026). As highlighted in Chapter 3, advances in Earth observation and citizen science are helping countries to collect SDG 6-related data that can be used to inform planning, resource allocation and decision-making, as well as for global SDG reporting. The UN General Assembly has also highlighted technology transfer as a water-related need for developing countries (UN, General Assembly, 2023).

The introduction of innovations for water-related areas requires a supportive public policy framework, including policies, standards and regulations, as well as financing mechanisms (Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs Forum, 2026). A preliminary mapping of water-related innovation ecosystems conducted by the UN-Water Task Force on Innovation has highlighted the barriers of scaling innovations beyond successful pilot projects to reach widespread adoption. Innovation challenges

supported by philanthropy are one mechanism that is incentivizing solutions to SDG 6-related challenges. For example, the XPRIZE Water Scarcity competition is designed to drive widespread access to clean water by creating reliable, sustainable and affordable seawater desalination solutions (XPRIZE Foundation, n.d.) and the Reinvent the Toilet Challenge aims to spur the creation of new toilet technologies that safely and effectively manage human waste (Gates Foundation, n.d.).

Evolving context of finance and capacity development

The global financing landscape for water and sanitation is undergoing structural transformation. Declining ODA flows, rising sovereign debt burdens, climate pressures and constrained public budgets are reshaping how investments are mobilized and structured (see box 5.1). The UN General Assembly has elevated addressing the need for increased financing for water and sanitation as a priority. In the outcomes of the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (Sevilla Commitment), Member States committed to supporting developing countries to develop quality, reliable, resilient and sustainable infrastructure, and recognized the need to close the significant infrastructure gap in critical sectors such as water and sanitation to improve access to essential services, employment opportunities, economic growth and sustainable development (UN, General Assembly, 2025b).

New approaches to development finance and the operational pathways are already emerging. Grants increasingly function as catalytic capital, capable of mobilizing significantly larger volumes of repayable and private finance through concessional lending, guarantees, blended finance structures and domestic capital market instruments. Domestic capital markets can play an important role in financing water infrastructure when transactions are properly structured. De-risking instruments can be used to mitigate financial risks such as partial credit and partial risk guarantees, political risk insurance, first-loss capital, liquidity facilities and local-currency guarantee instruments. These tools

are widely deployed in sectors such as energy and transport, but remain underutilized in the water sector. Fully integrating water and sanitation targets into climate actions frameworks positions water and sanitation infrastructure to access climate finance.

Differentiating financing approaches between upper-middle-income countries, LDCs and fragile contexts is fundamental. LDCs, particularly LLDCs and SIDS, face significantly different financing constraints due to their special situations. Building on commitments made at COP 28 and the One Water Summit, 10 multilateral development banks committed to strengthening global water security by 2030. In 2024 alone, these multilateral development banks approved \$19.6 billion in water-related financing, with \$14.4 billion focused on low- and middle-income countries, reflecting their shared ambition to improve access to safe water and sanitation, promote sustainable water resource management and scale up support for climate-resilient irrigation

systems (World Bank and others, 2025). Expenditure tracking methodologies such as TrackFin and WASH accounts are helping to collect and map financial flows for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services (WHO, n.d.b). Through this information, governments can identify bottlenecks and provide evidence to better plan, finance, manage and monitor drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services and systems (WHO, n.d.b). Additionally, to help address this issue, the UN General Assembly has adopted the Awaza Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2024–2034 that includes a key deliverable on exploring the feasibility of establishing an infrastructure investment finance facility for LLDCs (UN, General Assembly, 2024c).

Capacity is another key enabling foundation for SDG 6 implementation. SDG target 6.a calls for expanding capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting,

Box 5.1. Opportunities to strengthen operational pathways for financing water and sanitation

Closing the financing gap requires moving from project-by-project funding to a system-oriented financial architecture that combines domestic finance, ODA, climate finance and private capital, while deploying structured risk-sharing mechanisms and maintaining affordability and public oversight.

Priority actions include to:

- Expand monitoring of the means of implementation for water and sanitation beyond indicator 6.a.1 on ODA to track domestic, climate and blended finance flows.
- Develop country-level water investment platforms aligned with national plans.
- Scale de-risking instruments such as guarantees and first-loss capital.
- Introduce innovative instruments including blue and green revenue bonds and debt-for-water-resilience swaps.
- Strengthen capacity through project preparation and peer-to-peer mechanisms.
- Use grants as catalytic instruments designed to mobilize larger capital flows.
- Differentiate financing approaches between upper-middle-income countries, LDCs and fragile contexts.

Water financing is a question of structure as well as volume. Strategic use of limited public resources can mobilize significantly larger capital flows when supported by the right financial architecture and institutional capacity to strengthen financing systems that support and sustain projects. Nature-based solutions is an important area that requires standardized investable metrics.

desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies. The UN-Water SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative is the inter-agency coordination platform on freshwater-, sanitation- and hygiene-related capacity-development work. Strengthening national capacity to address the financing gaps can support countries to build a pipeline of bankable projects and reliable local partners, which will improve implementation and sector performance, and give financiers greater confidence in entering new markets.

Water as a “superconnector” for SDG acceleration and transformation

Water flows across the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Accelerated progress on SDG 6 can act as a catalyst for progress on other SDGs, and vice versa (UN-Water, 2016). Many interlinkages are mutually reinforcing, and SDG 6 has been identified as one of seven particularly synergistic goals (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023). This highlights the importance of integrated approaches to harness synergies and management trade-offs to ensure the sustainable management of natural resources and sustainable social and economic development (UN-Water, 2016).

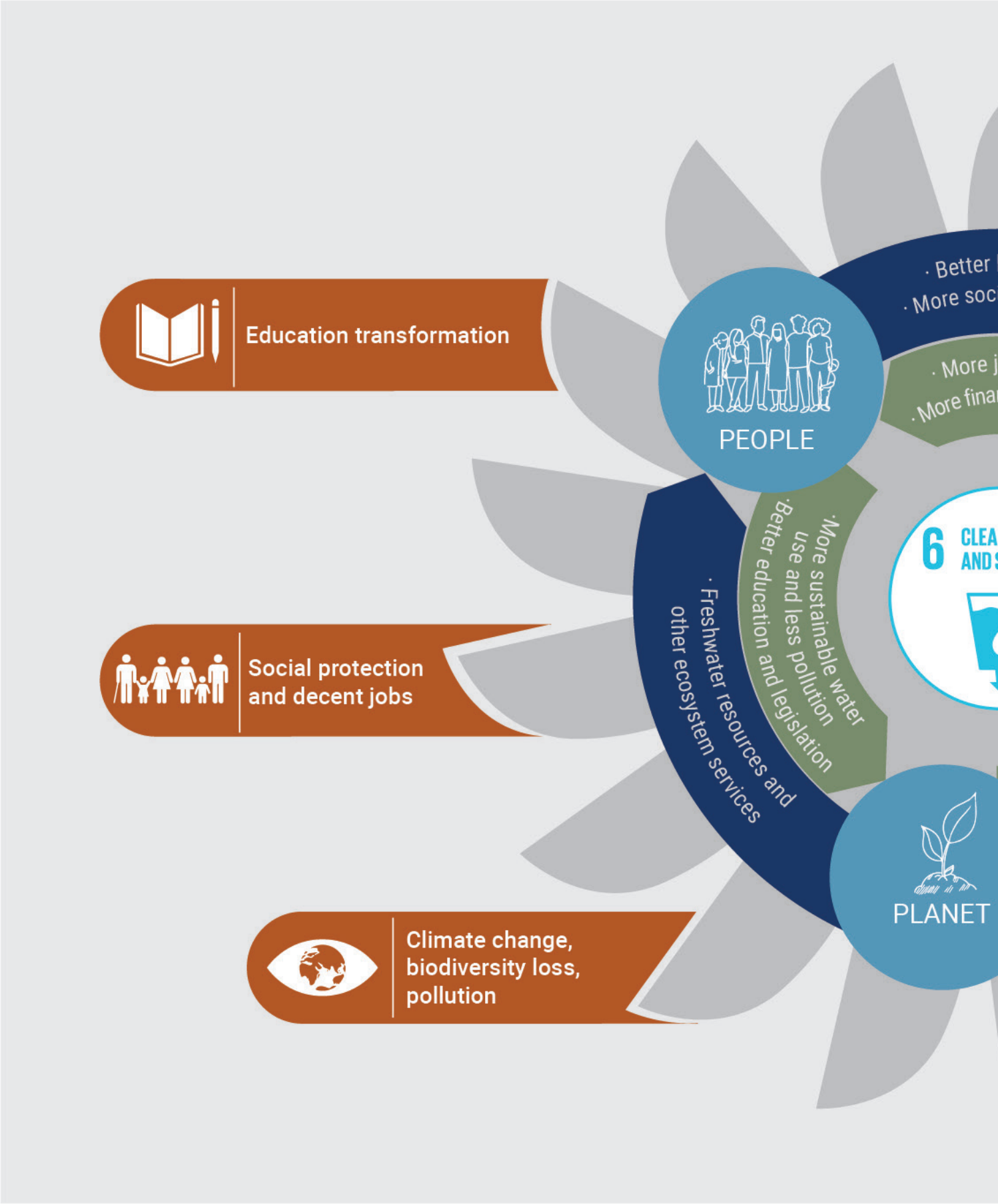
Global and regional shocks have marked the decade since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Many of these have affected water and sanitation, for example, climate change, water-related hazards, epidemics and pandemics, economic shocks and conflict. Water is a foundational enabler across multiple dimensions of sustainable development, and not only a sectoral policy. Progress on SDG 6 underpins outcomes in climate resilience, food security, energy production, public health and urban development. However, approaches remain largely siloed. Accelerating progress requires embedding water more systematically into the broader sustainable development agenda through cross-sectoral policies, planning and investment frameworks.

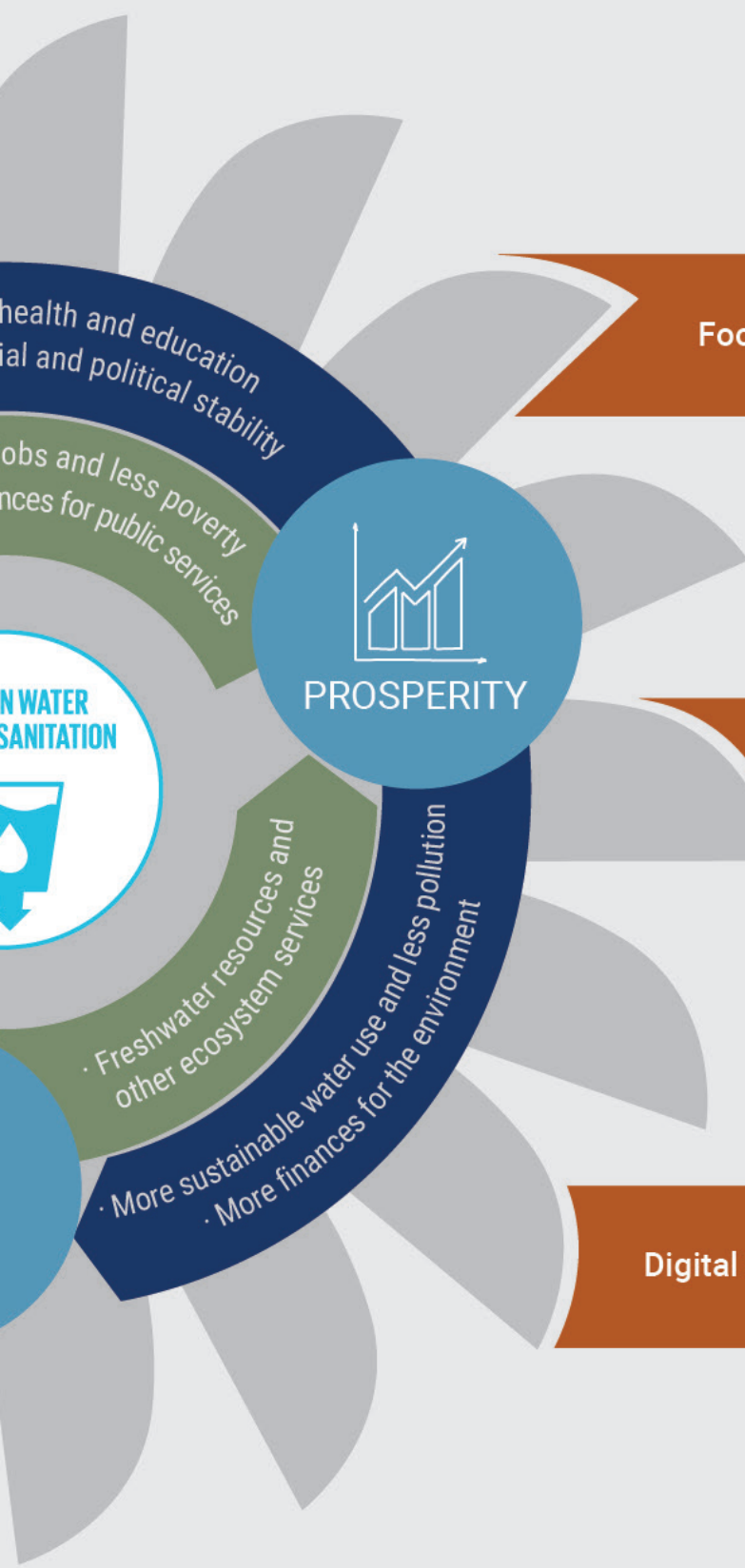
Analyses and forecasting show increasing linkages between water and sanitation with the clean energy transition, climate mitigation (UN-Water, 2024e) and adaptation, food systems (FAO, 2025), digitalization, circular economies, land and habitat protection, and restoration, among others. There is growing recognition that water and sanitation are vital entry points to accelerate the achievement of many sustainable development outcomes and that the cost of inaction is too high (Global Commission on the Economics of Water, 2024). There is also an emergence of systems-thinking approaches to water resources management and decision-making that takes into account the interconnections between competing resource systems, the spatial and temporal distribution of resources and trade-offs associated with multiple growth trends among water demands (Kulat and others, 2019; World Water Council, 2023).

Accelerated progress on water and sanitation also underpins key SDG transitions identified by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group to deliver interconnected investment pathways to accelerate SDG progress within and across countries (UNSDG, 2023). *Key Transitions – Sustainably Managed Water: A Superconnector for SDG Acceleration* discusses these linkages between water and sanitation and sustainable development transitions in greater depth (UN-Water and UN Development Coordination Office, 2025). These interlinkages are shown in figure 5.1.

Beyond 2030, future scenarios indicate water demand and water-related risks are likely to increase. Availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation will play a vital role in major sustainable development transitions and emerging economic sectors (see box 5.2). In this context, it is not surprising that the World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2026 identified that the three top long-term risks in the next 10 years are all environmental and linked to water management: extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and critical change to Earth systems (World Economic Forum, 2026). The scope and scale of

Figure 5.1 Water is a superconnector for SDG 6 acceleration





Food systems



Energy transition



Digital transformation



future water-related challenges cannot be addressed by working on water and sanitation as a sector in a silo. The interrelated cross-sectoral aspects need to be addressed holistically to truly make water and sanitation a driver of sustainable development.

Rising ambition for water and sanitation on the international agenda

There is growing demand from Member States to discuss water and sanitation issues as part of their deliberations at the UN. The UN 2023 Water Conference was convened in New York from 22 to 24 March 2023 in the context of the midterm review of the Water Action Decade. As a direct

Box 5.2. Water is a superconnector now and in the future

Looking ahead to 2050, water will be a pivotal determinant of sustainable development transitions and emerging economic sectors such as:

- **Food systems.** By 2050, FAO estimates 25% more fresh water will be needed for 50% more agricultural production due to meeting the demands of a growing global population estimated at 9.7 billion people (FAO, 2025).
- **Digital transformation.** Water is also an essential ingredient for the growing digital economy and artificial intelligence revolution. The rapid global expansion of artificial intelligence is set to drive a 129% increase in water demand across the value chain by 2050 (Xylem and Global Water Intelligence, 2026). More than 40% of data centres are already located in regions experiencing high water stress, and future growth is expected to concentrate in similarly constrained watersheds (Laudisio and others, 2025).
- **Clean energy transition.** Water plays an essential role in energy production (e.g. hydropower generation, cooling and extraction, and cultivation of biofuels), and energy plays a vital role in many aspects of water management (e.g. pumping, distribution, treatment and reuse processes, and desalination). The energy sector accounts for around 10% of global freshwater withdrawals (International Energy Agency, n.d.). While water is critical for energy production, the SDG targets for increased energy access do not explicitly mention sustainable use of water.
- **Decent jobs.** In 2021, 65% (or 2.1 billion) of the jobs constituting the global active workforce were water dependent. In low-income countries, a significant 79% of jobs were water dependent, primarily due to the dominance of agriculture, which relies heavily on water (Connor and Chaves Pacheco, 2024). Expanding irrigation alone, within local water thresholds, could create at least 245 million jobs, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Talbi and others, 2026).
- **Urban development.** The global urban population facing water scarcity is projected to increase from 933 million (one third of the global urban population) in 2016 to about 2 billion people (one third to nearly half of the global urban population) in 2050. The number of large cities exposed to water scarcity is projected to increase from 193 to 193–284, including 10–20 megacities (He and others, 2021).
- **International trade.** Through international trade, about 500 billion tons of water indirectly moves across borders every year – 50 times the weight of all the goods shipped by sea, or a quarter of total global water use (World Bank, 2026). In 2019, approximately 25% of global water consumption was allocated for export rather than domestic use. These flows have grown rapidly – the water embedded in the production of goods and services traded globally, known as virtual water trade, increased by 26% between 2000 and 2019 (Zhang and others, 2025).

result, in its follow-up resolution, the UN General Assembly mandated two additional UN conferences on water in 2026 and 2028, and requested the Secretary-General to prepare a UN system-wide water and sanitation strategy (resolution 77/334). The Secretary-General appointed the first Special Envoy on Water, representing an important step in strengthening UN senior leadership on water.

Additionally, there is growing recognition of water-related issues within multilateral processes, notably the three Rio Conventions (Convention on Biological Diversity, UNCCD and UNFCCC), and UN political declarations including the 2023 SDG Summit, the Pact for the Future,¹⁸ the Sevilla Commitment and the Doha Political Declaration of the “World Social Summit”, as well as the 2024 QCPR resolution, facilitating opportunities for water to be mainstreamed within other policy areas. The increased prominence of references to water-related issues in political declarations and global monitoring and indicator framework represents an important step forward, although much remains to be done.

Regional bodies are also elevating water as a political priority. The African Union declared 2026 as the “Year of Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063” and African Heads of State and Governments launched the Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy at the thirty-ninth Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union, signalling a strategic shift that places water and sanitation at the centre of Africa’s political and development agenda (AMCOW, 2026). In 2025, the European Commission adopted the European Water Resilience Strategy that aims to restore and protect the water cycle, securing clean and affordable water for all, and creating a sustainable, resilient, smart and competitive water economy in Europe (European Commission, 2025).

Water emerging as an indicative test and source of hope for multilateralism

Against a backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions, intensifying impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, and increasing populations facing multidimensional vulnerabilities and protracted crises, combined with a highly resource-constrained fiscal environment, a growing unsustainable debt burden and a changing global aid architecture, closing the gaps on water and sanitation will be complex, but could also be a driver for peace, prosperity and resilience (UN-Water, 2025b).

Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDG 6 has taken place within the context of reforms of the UN. These have included repositioning of the UN development system, UN 2.0 and UN80. The UN System-wide Strategy is already closely aligned with UN reform processes, including UN80, which aims to build a stronger and more effective UN that delivers for people. Navigating this shifting environment offers opportunities, but it also bears potential risks of reducing the UN system’s capacities and capabilities to deliver demand-driven support on water and sanitation.

The UN system’s water and sanitation programmes have not been immune to the historic decline in ODA in 2025 (OECD, 2026). With no single UN agency dedicated to water, the cumulative scope and scale of cuts to water and sanitation programmes is a collective blind spot, risking a sudden loss of capacity developed, systems built and investments made over decades. Core UN system functions such as coordination, normative guidance, global monitoring and reporting could cease to exist. These reductions in resources come at a critical time to respond to rising Member State ambition on water and sanitation in the lead-up to the 2026 and 2028 UN conferences on water and to scale up implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy in response to growing demand for support from programme countries. These pressures make the role of water in the global sustainable development agenda more essential than ever.

¹⁸ The Pact for the Future is the outcome document of the 2024 Summit of the Future that took place in New York on 22 and 23 September 2024. The UN General Assembly adopted it in resolution A/RES/79/1.

5.3 Forward-looking perspectives

Building on the lessons learned from the past decade of experience and the changing landscape, this section provides forward-looking perspectives from the UN system and partners for the approach towards 2030 and beyond.

Specifically, what needs to change to accelerate progress of SDG 6, and how can momentum and impact be sustained towards 2030 and beyond?

Answering these questions requires strengthening the implementation of SDG 6 to address gaps and missing elements, while also rising to a new level of ambition to meet current and future global water challenges.

Strategic window of opportunity – 2026 to 2028

With time running out for the 2030 Agenda and the Water Action Decade, the sequence of upcoming UN processes and events provides a

strategic window of opportunity from 2026 to 2028 for Member States to decide on the future of water and sanitation within intergovernmental processes at the UN. While specific modalities are still to be decided on by Member States, table 5.1 shows some key milestones.

The sequence of three UN conferences on water and related preparatory meetings were established through a succession of UN General Assembly decisions related to the 2030 Agenda and Water Action Decade. While this has created continuity for global political dialogue on water during the 2023–2028 time frame, the elements are related to different political processes – the 2026 UN Water Conference is related to SDG 6 and the 2030 Agenda, whereas the UN 2023 and 2028 Water Conferences serve as the midterm and final comprehensive reviews of the Water Action Decade, respectively.

Table 5.1. Timeline of major UN-related milestones relevant for the future of water beyond the 2030 Agenda

Year	Month	Milestone
2026	July	HLPF 2026, including an in-depth review of SDG 6 and annual special event (A/RES/78/285, New York)
2026	December	2026 UN Water Conference (A/RES/78/327, Abu Dhabi)
2027	By September	Secretary-General's final report to assess progress on the Water Action Decade by the end of the eighty-first session of the UN General Assembly (A/RES/77/334)
2027	September	2027 SDG Summit. HLPF, under the auspices of the UN General Assembly, to consider how to advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond, as mandated by the Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1, New York) and HLPF (A/RES/67/290)
2028	To be decided	UN 2028 Water Conference (A/RES/77/334, Dushanbe)
2028	September	Review of the overall implementation of the Pact for the Future by the UN General Assembly through a meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government (A/RES/79/1, New York)

The intertwined processes and timelines offer strategic opportunities to elevate water and sanitation on the UN intergovernmental agenda and build consensus towards future UN General Assembly mandates beyond the end-points of the Water Action Decade and 2030 Agenda.

Note: The list of mandated high-level UN events and conferences in table 5.1 does not reflect the associated political processes related to the negotiation of relevant future UN General Assembly resolutions or political declarations where future mandates for UN action on water issues and/or the broader development agenda beyond 2030 can be discussed and decided upon by Member States.

From incremental progress towards transformational change

After 10 years of implementation of SDG 6, the result is clear: having a dedicated goal for water and sanitation has been very useful, moderately impactful and only partially achievable under current conditions. Thus, the approach to water towards 2030 and beyond requires that SDG 6 and future water- and sanitation-related goals and targets are strengthened, better resourced and delivered differently.

Building on the past decade of experience and in the context of the changing global landscape, this section explores six opportunities to shift the pace of SDG 6 progress from incremental improvements towards transformational change:

1. Accelerating, improving and transforming SDG 6 implementation

Changing the trajectory of progress of SDG 6 up to 2030 will require deliberate actions to deliver results with sufficient scale and speed to close the gaps and reach those left behind. The upcoming 2026 UN Water Conference and the UN 2028 Water Conference are pivotal occasions to galvanize political will and partnership to drive implementation in support of national plans and strategies for achieving SDG 6. To do so, countries will need

to make water and sanitation more investible by strengthening systems, including regulatory frameworks, institutional and human capacity, and operational and financial performance.

Ten years in, the delivery of SDG 6 has been under-resourced. In addition, it has been difficult to systematically quantify and track the needs and gaps in financing, institutional and human resources capacity, data and information, innovations and governance systems across SDG 6 targets. A transition is needed from fragmented, project-based financing approaches towards a systemic financing and capacity architecture for water and sanitation. This requires treating water as foundational for a resilient-economy infrastructure and strategically combining domestic public finance, concessional finance, climate finance and private capital through structured risk-sharing mechanisms that maintain affordability, equity and public oversight. It also requires better alignment of global frameworks with national priorities, needs and plans.

Multilateral financing mechanisms have yet to systematically direct resources to where needs are greatest. Stronger project preparation support, expanded use of guarantees and blended finance instruments, improved tracking of financing flows beyond ODA, and differentiated financing approaches tailored to country contexts are required to reach LDCs, LLDCs, SIDS and fragile contexts and to more systematically target resources to close equity gaps within countries to fulfil the pledge that “no one will be left behind”. There is a need to progressively improve tracking of finance flows beyond indicator 6.a.1 on ODA to track domestic, climate, blended and other finance flows.

Strengthening institutional and human capacity, including through peer-to-peer mechanisms and utility partnerships, should be recognized as a foundational investment necessary to build the water and sanitation workforce, improve implementation performance and sustainability, develop credible project pipelines and mobilize financing at scale. Going forward, there is

a pressing need to shift the financing and capacity paradigm for water and sanitation to drive more systemic, transformative change.

2. Addressing water as a systemic driver of sustainable development

While there is increasing recognition of the centrality of water and sanitation to accelerate progress on sustainable development outcomes and advance transitions, in practice, working on water as a cross-sector issue continues to face obstacles. High-level political commitment is necessary for effective cross-sector coordination to manage competing demands between cities, agriculture, energy, industry and ecosystems. Integrating sustainable management of water and sanitation into other development sector actions requires policy alignment and incentives for cross-sector priority setting on the allocation of funds towards mutually reinforcing water-related investments.

Strengthening and institutionalizing cross-sectoral coordination and decision-making on water and sanitation will: ensure policy coherence; improve management, allocation and use; and secure shared benefits and manage trade-offs. Investments by countries and partners in interoperable platforms, Earth observation, citizen science and shared data systems can strengthen data availability, data use and decision-making on water-related issues across sectors and international agendas.

Continued mainstreaming of water-related issues into existing intergovernmental processes is essential to increase and sustain political commitment and to ensure policy coherence on an issue that underpins the success of the 2030 Agenda. This approach will ensure water is addressed in a consistent manner across the different processes and to harness the transformational function of water (e.g. for climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation, drought and desertification, food security, health, peacebuilding and disaster resilience). This can be done through continued integration of water into national policy documents

and plans such as nationally determined contributions, national adaptation plans, national biodiversity strategies and plans, drought plans, disaster risk reduction plans of action, and integrated land-use management and agrifood plans.

Use of compatible indicators is another opportunity for greater interoperability between multilateral processes and frameworks to improve coherence and reduce fragmentation, while minimizing reporting burdens for countries. While SDG 6 monitoring has improved significantly over the past decade in terms of coverage, quality and analytical sophistication, it was not originally designed to fully capture climate resilience or other specific topic areas. For example, advancing monitoring of the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience target 9a will require adapting methodologies to integrate resilience metrics and strengthening cross-sectoral data integration.

Addressing water and sanitation issues more coherently within and across the intergovernmental processes will also enable the UN system to support country-level policy integration more efficiently and effectively, where these changes are most needed and have the greatest impact. The UN System-wide Strategy has adopted and fully supports this approach to work collaboratively on water and sanitation, not as a sector in a silo, but holistically to address the interrelated cross-sectoral aspects of water and sanitation. Efforts are under way through the Collaborative Implementation Plan to support mainstreaming on water in the Rio Conventions.

3. Enabling more structured and meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue

Stakeholders are at the heart of the use and long-term sustainability of water and sanitation solutions. SDG 6 and the Water Action Decade have mobilized diverse stakeholders worldwide and provided orientation on how they can be involved and contribute. Feedback from stakeholders consulted through the SDG 6 public

consultation survey for this report indicates SDG 6 has functioned better as a political framework than an implementation mechanism.

Stronger multi-stakeholder coordination and engagement is essential at all levels. Meaningful participation requires structured processes and channels for dialogue. Target 6.b was intended to support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation, as a means of implementation for SDG 6. However, as explained in section 3.8 and box 3.1, this target could become more effective if modified in the next generation of global development goals beyond 2030.

Going forward, there is a need to reinforce and systematize opportunities for contributions by key stakeholder groups and rights holders that have not yet been sufficiently integrated, notably youth, Indigenous Peoples and the private sector. These issues were emphasized during the one-day stakeholder meeting and High-level Preparatory Meeting for the 2026 UN Water Conference that took place in Dakar in January 2026 (DESA, 2026) and which resulted in recommendations to ensure meaningful and inclusive participation as part of future global water processes.

At the global level, there are opportunities to reinforce the continuity of stakeholder engagement through the existing Major Group and other Stakeholders coordination mechanism and Economic and Social Council processes such as the Youth Forum and UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The upcoming UN conferences on water in 2026 and 2028, including their preparatory and follow-up processes, can provide opportunities to better structure meaningful dialogue and advance more effective multi-stakeholder partnerships and cooperation as part of UN multilateral processes.

4. Building on lessons learned from SDG 6 implementation to improve future water-related goals

A future water and sanitation goal will need to better bridge high-level policy targets with implementation and operational realities. The two SDG 6 means of implementation targets and indicators (6.a and 6.b) capture only a fraction of the actual resources, tools and systems required to achieve SDG 6 in practice. For example, the five SDG 6 global accelerators: financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation and governance, could provide a broader set of relevant topics related to means of implementation (UN-Water, 2020a). Explicitly linking means of implementation targets and indicators to each outcome target area could provide a stronger results pathway from inputs to impact.

Gaps remain in other areas covered by SDG 6 targets and indicators. For example, target 6.3 includes “increasing recycling and safe reuse”; however, this aspect of the target is not monitored within the SDG indicator framework. The 2024 progress report for indicator 6.3.1 explored the challenges and opportunities for future global monitoring of safe wastewater reuse, noting its contribution to the circular economy, reduced dependency on freshwater withdrawals, interlinkages with climate mitigation and adaptation, and reduced pollution of receiving waters, among other benefits (UN-Habitat and WHO, 2024). Water reuse has also been highlighted as an area of considerable opportunity to attract public and private sector participation and investment for municipal, industrial and agricultural applications (Global Commission on the Economics of Water, 2024). Additionally, the linkages can be strengthened with water-related targets under other goal areas, such as water-related disasters (target 11.5) and floods and droughts (target 15.3), that address these water-related topics at target level, but do not have global indicators to track progress.

Building on the experience of SDG 6, a post-2030 framework could address missing elements. This could be done, for example, by adopting a

more robust, holistic and integrated approach covering the full hydrological cycle, that could include the cryosphere, groundwater, soil moisture and evapotranspiration by addressing water-related hazards such as floods and droughts while reinforcing water's role across sectors.

5. Ensuring a future intergovernmental process for water at the UN beyond 2030

Political will is a key success factor to accelerate the delivery of water and sanitation outcomes on the ground. Sustaining and amplifying political ambition and leadership requires regular high-level conferences and other events for public announcements, voluntary commitments, political declarations, negotiations and accountability. Interest is high from Member States to engage in global dialogue on water. The political leadership of Member States to co-host conferences and co-chair interactive dialogues alongside active participation of delegations in the UN conferences on water and related preparatory meetings and events are good examples.

The end-points for the Water Action Decade and the 2030 Agenda are fast approaching. Once these mandates expire, there will be no regular, coherent intergovernmental process convened under the UN General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council where Member States can take stock of progress, provide strategic guidance and align efforts on water and sanitation across the international agenda. While water-related issues are addressed in other intergovernmental process across the UN system,¹⁹ these processes remain fragmented and sector specific. This jeopardizes the progress and momentum catalysed by the unique sequence of UN conferences on water in 2023, 2026 and 2028 and the accountability for ongoing water-related actions.

To facilitate discussions on water-related issues beyond these mandates, Member States will need to mandate an intergovernmental process for water at the UN beyond 2030. Such a process could be convened within the

UN General Assembly or Economic and Social Council, with substantive outcomes, including the possibility of intergovernmentally agreed declarations. Such a process could sustain political momentum, facilitate global dialogue on water and exchanges of experience, provide a follow-up mechanism to monitor and review progress of targets and voluntary commitments, foster structured stakeholder engagement, improve donor coordination, and enhance coherence and coordination to reduce fragmentation.

6. Scaling up agile and effective UN system-wide support, coordination and delivery of water and sanitation

Since 2023, Member States' decisions have elevated water and sanitation as a UN system priority: first, the request to the Secretary-General to prepare a UN system-wide water and sanitation strategy (resolution 77/334), and subsequently, the request to the UN development system to strengthen actions to accelerate progress on SDG 6 in programme countries (resolution 79/226). The CEB's endorsement of the UN System-wide Strategy and subsequent establishment of the UN-Water Principals Meetings has unified system-wide senior UN leadership support for implementation and follow-up through UN-Water. Close collaboration between the Development Coordination Office, UN-Water and the five regional commissions is also rapidly operationalizing and localizing the UN System-wide Strategy at regional and country levels within programme countries through Resident Coordinators and UN country teams

However, while efforts are advancing at full speed, the UN system's potential to deliver on water and sanitation is in a fragile balance: ambition and demand are rising with the UN System-wide Strategy and its implementation, while capacity and resources are increasingly stretched.

The Mid-term External Review of the UN-Water 2030 Strategy concluded that over the period 2000–2025, UN-Water has “matured institutionally”, while also

¹⁹ This refers to the UN as defined by the UN System Chart (UN, n.d.).

highlighting the need for strengthening UN-Water's institutional anchoring and for predictable multi-year funding (Hydroconseil, 2026b) (see box 5.3).

Looking ahead, the same review recommended for UN-Water to act as an “enabler of joint delivery” in support of upscaling and embedding the implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy within UN country teams and regional commissions. In line with the UN System-wide Strategy, UN-Water plays an important horizontal and vertical coordination role, acting as a “systems connector” to leverage whole-of-UN-system support and to mobilize stakeholders and partnerships to enhance demand-driven support to countries on water and sanitation. This can be done by strengthening the water and sanitation programmes within UN entities and aligning their strategies and work programmes with the UN System-wide Strategy. Upscaled support through a reinforced “country offer” (e.g. “on-demand support mechanism”) that taps into the vast expertise of UN-Water Members and Partners could unlock greater potential of the UN system to more efficiently and effectively jointly deliver at scale, respond to country support needs and requests, support inter-country learning

and share experiences. The UN-Water inter-agency mechanism can provide catalytic support through seed funding, programming support tools, strategic dialogues, peer-to-peer support, co-creation spaces and other approaches.

The UN system's capacity to deliver the UN System-wide Strategy can be enhanced using a two-pronged approach as follows.

First, strengthen the water and sanitation programmes in each individual UN entity to scale up delivery and to enable better coordination across the UN system. UN-Water is its Members and Partners. The Members of UN-Water cut across most water-related themes and are the institutions that carry out programmatic work on water and sanitation within the UN system. Enhancing their human resources capacity to engage with UN-Water to a greater degree and take part in coordinated activities across the UN system will help the UN and its partners deliver in a more efficient and effective manner.

This can be done through anchoring and reinforcing water- and sanitation-related programmes in strategic plans, results frameworks, resource allocations, staffing structures and partnerships. It

Box 5.3. Forward-looking implications for the UN system

- **UN-Water must act as an “enabler of joint delivery”.** Embedding the UN System-wide Strategy within UN country teams and regional commissions will be critical.
- **Institutional anchoring and financing.** Achieving predictable multi-year funding and clarifying UN-Water's legal and administrative status are prerequisites for sustainability.
- **Measurement of collective impact.** Future strategies should include a limited set of system-wide indicators to track how coordination translates into country-level change.
- **Integration of capacity and data systems.** Linking IMI-SDG6 and the UN-Water Capacity Development Initiative outputs with country programming can transform global knowledge into local capability.
- **Equity and representation.** Ensuring stronger participation of LDCs and SIDS in governance and integrating leave no one behind outcomes into the Collaborative Implementation Plan will operationalize resolution 77/334 commitments.

Source: Adapted from Hydroconseil (2026b)

includes the allocation of financial resources, staff or staff time dedicated to water and sanitation, including coordination through UN-Water. The UN-Water secretariat²⁰ can support by facilitating the mobilization of resources to be made available to the agencies through the UN-Water Inter-agency Trust Fund to ensure these programmes are strengthened, or, at a minimum, maintained at current levels. This approach increases the overall capacity of UN-Water collectively to deliver joint action, while also giving its Members increased capacity to engage on water-related issues within their respective mandated areas.

Strengthening UN-Water can also be achieved through formalizing and recognizing contributions of UN-Water Member staff to coordination efforts. For staff, their UN-Water related work is often performed on top of their regular set of deliverables. Also, Member States who sit on UN-Water Member executive boards or governing bodies could advocate for the value of coordination on water challenges via the UN System-wide Strategy.

Second, enhance UN-Water's inter-agency mandate by adding a coordination office.

There is a need to strengthen the UN-Water secretariat's ability to fulfil its functions by making it a coordination office.²¹ A coordination office in the UN is a specialized unit or department within the UN system that aims to enhance coordination and cooperation among various entities and agencies of the UN. The primary role of a coordination office is to promote synergy and coherence in the implementation of UN programmes, policies and initiatives. The evolution of the UN-Water secretariat into a coordination office would strengthen UN-Water's inter-agency coordination mandate to facilitate implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy across the mandates and levels of the UN system.

Additionally, a coordination office would increase UN-Water's visibility within the "UN hierarchy" (Hydroconseil, 2026b). For example, the addition of a coordination office would enable what currently is the UN-Water secretariat to be officially represented in UN system coordination and governing bodies, participate in UN system corporate processes, be included in UN system-wide communications, and be accredited to participate in official UN meetings and conferences as a collective voice of its Members and Partners. Such a coordination office would serve, and not replace or supersede, the UN-Water inter-agency mechanism.²²

With increased attention to water issues within the UN, it is critical that the UN-Water inter-agency coordination mechanism be strengthened and visible within the UN hierarchy to formally take part in and support the preparations for post-2030 and UN reform discussions.

²⁰ The secretariat of UN-Water is the UN-Water Management Team. It comprises a Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary and Technical Advisory Unit.

²¹ This was first proposed in the 2023 UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report (UN, 2023a); the UN system and its partners are reaffirming this recommendation in this 2026 report.

²² A coordination office for UN-Water would be funded through extrabudgetary resources. The rotation of the UN-Water Chair among the UN Executive Heads would also be maintained.





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Recommendations and conclusion

This chapter makes the following recommendations for strengthening a UN multilateral approach for water and sanitation towards 2030 and beyond.

6.1 Accelerating, improving and transforming SDG 6 implementation

- Make a transformational shift in the approach to finance and capacity development for water and sanitation. Take advantage of the rapidly evolving development finance landscape and advances in science, technology and innovation, in conjunction with a systems strengthening approach, to support countries to scale up implementation of national policies and plans. Use tailored approaches to better reach developing countries including LDCs, SIDS, LLDCs and other countries in special situations.
- Capitalize on the upcoming 2026 and 2028 UN conferences on water to galvanize political will, reinforce partnership and international cooperation, and align efforts to support implementation and financing of national water and sanitation plans and strategies, and transboundary cooperation as appropriate.

6.2 Addressing water as a systemic driver of sustainable development

- At country level, strengthen cross-sectoral coordination and decision-making to ensure water is coherently integrated into relevant national policies and plans for water-related sectors including agriculture, energy, environment, health, education, social protection, economy, urban and rural development, and finance.
- Continue mainstreaming water-related issues within existing intergovernmental processes. Strengthen ongoing synergies between SDG 6 and other intergovernmental processes to advance more coherent multilateral delivery and progress on internationally agreed water- and sanitation-related goals and targets.

- Align efforts towards compatible policy objectives, targets and indicators across water-related multilateral frameworks and in corresponding national commitments, implementation plans and monitoring systems.

6.3 Enabling more structured and meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue

- Better structure, foster continuity and improve coordination and engagement between different stakeholder groups and actors within existing and future water-related intergovernmental processes at the UN. This includes embedding water and sanitation issues within existing stakeholder platforms.
- Promote and facilitate the participation of stakeholders, including local communities, in water and sanitation policies, plans and decision-making processes to improve water and sanitation management.
- Bridge stakeholder engagement efforts and sustain momentum from 2023 towards the 2026 and 2028 UN conferences on water.

6.4 Building on lessons learned from SDG 6 to improve future water-related goals

- Towards 2030 and beyond, design a more robust and integrated approach to address the means of implementation that can provide a critical missing link between high-level policy targets and the means required to implement and achieve them.
- Consolidate evidence and data to support proposals for possible future improvements to SDG 6, including potential candidate targets and indicators for consideration in a possible post-2030 framework.

- To strengthen future water- and sanitation-related goals and targets, Member States could address missing elements from SDG 6 while reinforcing water's role across sectors, in alignment with other intergovernmental processes and multilateral environmental agreements.

6.5 Ensuring a future intergovernmental process for water at the UN beyond 2030

- Member States can decide to convene a mandated intergovernmental process on water within the UN General Assembly or Economic and Social Council to keep progress moving forward and keep water elevated as a priority on the international agenda beyond 2030.

6.6 Scaling up agile and effective UN system-wide support, coordination and delivery of water and sanitation

- Strengthen water and sanitation programmes in individual UN entities to scale up delivery of coordinated support to programme countries across mandates and levels of the UN system, including by facilitating mobilization of resources for joint actions coordinated through UN-Water.
- Continue to scale up and localize implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy through joint country programmes that respond to national priorities and plans, reinforced through catalytic support to Resident Coordinators and UN country teams and a "UN-Water expertise on-demand mechanism" that connects countries and leverages UN entities' and partners' expertise and resources across mandates.
- Enhance the UN-Water inter-agency mandate through the evolution of the UN-Water secretariat into a coordination office. This would offer an institutionally anchored, yet lean and flexible model for UN-Water that is equipped

to coordinate delivery of the UN System-wide Strategy and remain nimble to respond to future needs. Such a coordination office would serve the UN-Water inter-agency mandate.

6.7 Conclusion

Ten years of implementing SDG 6 have shown that progress is not only possible, it is already happening at scale. However, while national plans are yielding results and stakeholder support is at an all-time high, much remains to be done. Gains remain uneven and incremental, with implementation gaps persisting.

The potential positive impact of "availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all" is unparalleled. With less than five years until 2030, this is a critical juncture to bridge the gap between potential and reality. Through better resourcing, sharper execution, deeper partnerships and multilateral cooperation, it will be possible to deliver more tangible results for people, prosperity and the planet towards 2030 and beyond. Closing the vast financing gap will require sustained political will and broader partnerships capable of crowding in capital from across sectors, including private capital.

Rising to meet the ambition of Member States and address future water challenges will require more action on water and sanitation. This makes the case for building on SDG 6 to sustain momentum with a dedicated water goal post-2030 and enhanced multilateral efforts that can drive lasting, systemic impact.

Abbreviations and acronyms

2030 Agenda	Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
2026 UN Water Conference	2026 United Nations Water Conference to Accelerate the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
AQUASTAT	Global Information System on Water and Agriculture
CEB	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
COP	Conference of the Parties
DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GEMS/Water	Global Environmental Monitoring System for Water
GLAAS	UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water
HLPF	United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IMI-SDG6	Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Sustainable Development Goal 6
ISIC	International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities
IWRM	integrated water resources management
JMP	WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene
LDC	least developed country
LLDC	landlocked developing country
MDG	Millennium Development Goal

<u>NWRMA</u>	National Water Resources Management Agency, Sierra Leone
<u>ODA</u>	official development assistance
<u>OECD</u>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<u>OECD-CRS</u>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Creditor Reporting System
<u>QCPR</u>	quadrennial comprehensive policy review
<u>SDG</u>	Sustainable Development Goal
<u>SIDS</u>	small island developing State(s)
<u>UAE</u>	United Arab Emirates
<u>UN</u>	United Nations
<u>UN 2023 Water Conference</u>	United Nations Conference for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028
<u>UN 2028 Water Conference</u>	United Nations Conference on the Final Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028
<u>UN80</u>	United Nations 80 th Anniversary Initiative
<u>UNCCD</u>	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
<u>UNECE</u>	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
<u>UNEP</u>	United Nations Environment Programme
<u>UNESCO</u>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<u>UNFCCC</u>	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
<u>UN-Habitat</u>	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
<u>UNICEF</u>	United Nations Children’s Fund
<u>UN System-wide Strategy</u>	United Nations System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation

<u>Water Action Decade</u>	International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028
<u>Water Convention</u>	1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes
<u>Watercourses Convention</u>	1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses
<u>WHO</u>	World Health Organization

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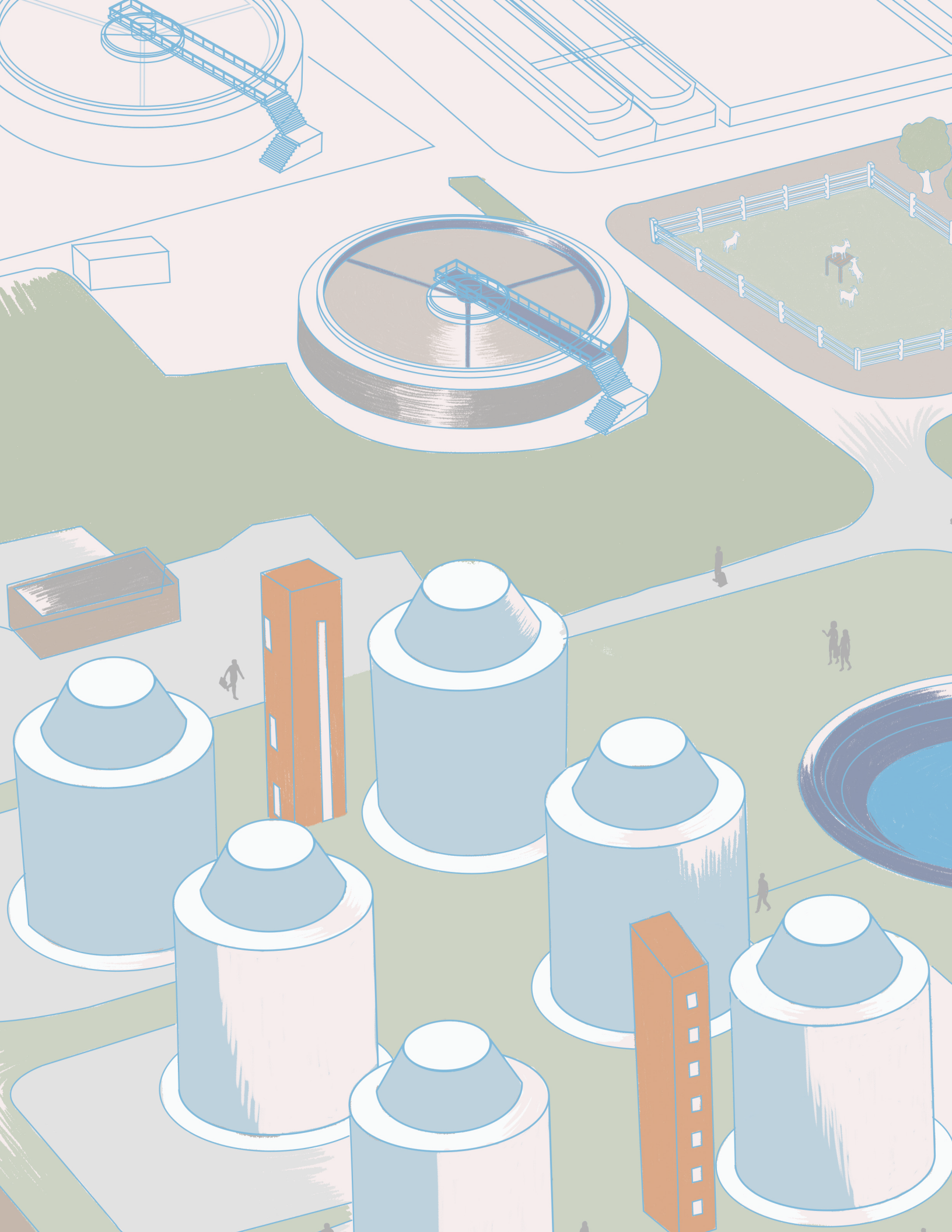
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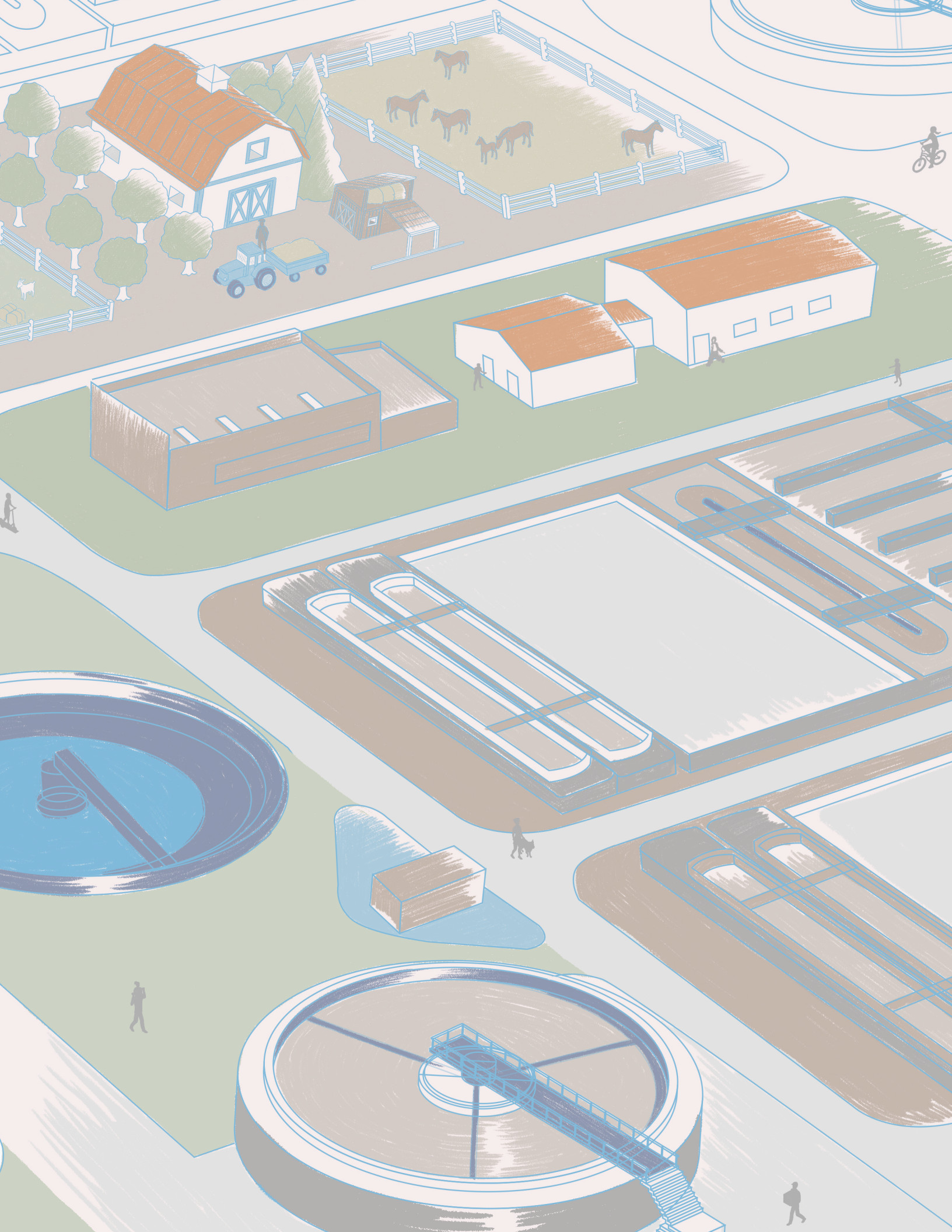
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