

**Building a Resilient Future through Water:
an open letter to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) from
multi-stakeholder representatives of the water and development community**

30 November 2018

The SDGs describe a trajectory for global development where no single goal may be in exclusive focus, as the collective set of interdependent goals constitute the pathway to the “future we want”. Navigating the complexity of multiple goals, competing demands and changing global conditions requires a coherent approach, focused upon a common priority that may guide decisions on development alternatives. In this way, **Water serves as a common and connecting factor providing a coherent basis for decision-making and design to achieve the SDGs.**

Fresh water connects economies, ecosystems, and social systems across local, national, regional and global scales. Hydrological resources and risks determine the feasibility of achieving environmental, social and economic goals at these scales. Water is essential for basic human needs and is vital to maintaining productive and resilient natural ecosystems, and is central to any prospects of food, energy, and economic security and improved livelihoods. Water has a critical role to play in both mitigation of and adaptation to climate change. And not least, water is an important factor in the spiritual and aesthetic lives of billions of people. **Effective water management presents a transformative opportunity to convert risk to resilience, poverty to well-being, and degraded ecosystems to vibrant ones.**

Working through water is essential to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, as well as the New Urban Agenda. Water can bridge across and enhance these agendas by revealing critical interdependencies and potential synergies and trade-offs among targets and thereby enabling an integrated and efficient approach to implementation. Fulfilling the aims of SDG6 would provide enormous co-benefits for the full range of human development aspirations, as well as for disaster risk reduction, resilience-building and risk management. Such benefits have been recognized in the World Economic Forum’s Global Risk Report for several years.

Effective delivery of the targets set for Agenda 2030 requires that we adequately account for value of water in development, that we ardently build water resilience and, thus, greater water security. Water is at the core of the global development agenda. An integrated and holistic approach with water at the heart of policies, planning and investments, provides the foundation for a transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies.

We, the co-signatures of this open letter, with a view to accelerating the delivery on SDG 6 and other water related goals and targets, respectfully share key areas of focus and concern that we feel are essential to the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda and aforementioned key global agendas and to which we pledge our collective support and alignment.

Our Progress on SDG 6

Delivering on SDG 6 remains a daunting challenge. Progress to date is wholly inadequate. 69 countries are not on track to achieve basic water coverage for all in 2030. 89 are not on track to meet sanitation targets. The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply,

Sanitation and Hygiene (2017) report that 3 in 10, or **2.1 billion people lack access to safe, readily available water at home** and 6 in 10, or **4.5 billion people lack safely managed sanitation**.

To deliver on SDG6 and other water related targets, we must bridge the gap between policies and execution in practice. **Increased accountability, transparency and participation in water management is imperative to any prospect of progressing on SDG 6 and all related goals and agendas.** While policies are in place in many countries, broad stakeholder participation varies from moderate to low levels. Moreover, the degree of influence of people's participation in decision making needs to be enhanced. Access to information about service performance, at national and subnational levels, must be improved for water and sanitation services in almost every country and regulatory actions must be strengthened.

Institutional aspects and governance are key to the achievement of the SDGs and central to our water aims. Sustainable, inclusive and effective governance is a prerequisite to providing water resources and Human rights-based approaches must be at the core of the effort to achieve SDG6. Enhanced coordination between sectors and actors is paramount for capturing co-benefits and addressing trade-offs among interconnected goals, water provides a means of resolving this complex challenge.

Financing remains a major deficiency. While, paradoxically, foreign aid commitments for water have decreased, the estimated costs for achieving the 2030 targets for water and sanitation require a threefold increase in existing levels of investment (Addis Ababa Action Agenda).

In the Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report 2018 on Water and Sanitation, UN-Water highlights the **need for more and easily accessible data and strengthened national monitoring systems and capacities to track progress towards achieving SDG 6.** This will also help increase the transparency and accountability of the decision-making process, and help build awareness and encourage public, private and civil society engagement.

At the same time, advances in technology and innovation are more widely accessible than ever before. These advances are fundamentally changing what is possible across many fields of human endeavour – including longstanding efforts to deliver water security to the world's growing population and the governments and industries that support them.

Designing for Resilience in Water and Human Systems

Resilience is the ability of societies, economies, human and natural systems to respond and adapt to shocks and stresses and to transform when conditions require it. **The ability of freshwater systems to cope with current and future stresses is fundamental to any prospect of sustainable development.** Our continuing inefficient use of fresh water, degradation of aquatic ecosystems and disruption of critical freshwater services poses a critical challenge to our common future, as water underpins the resilience of natural and human systems.

Approaches to building resilience in water systems are increasingly understood and undertaken in urban, agricultural and energy systems. Resilience provides a robust means of considering the complex interdependencies among SDGs. **Water offers a coherent approach to solve for the resilience and sustainable development of human systems in the modern Anthropocene era.**

Valuing Water

Achieving sustainability in water systems and related human development aims is hindered by long-recognized undervaluation of water and freshwater ecosystems. Inadequate economic valuation and

ineffective pricing of water for energy generation, industrial and agricultural activities, and domestic uses has led to inefficient water use, excessive pollutants, and degraded freshwater systems.

Valuing water means recognising and considering all benefits provided by water that encompass economic, social and ecological dimensions appropriate to local circumstances and cultures. Safeguarding the poor, the vulnerable and the environment is required in all instances. Valuing water differently can help balance the multiple uses and services provided by water and inform decisions about allocating water across uses and services to maximise well-being. Valuing water can make the cost of pollution and waste apparent and promote greater efficiency and better practices. A deeper understanding and acceptance of the values of water enables responsible use and balancing different needs and uses, with inclusion and empowerment of all levels of society.

Our Recommendations

The measures put in place today to manage current and future water stresses will determine our future resilience and well-being. To improve access to water services for all, enable better water resources management for the people and nature, and mitigate the drivers of water conflict, countries and local authorities must:

- Adopt a resilience-building approach to designs for social and economic progress, recognizing the fundamental need of human and natural systems to thrive under global change;
- Address market failures to adequately value water, reduce pollution, incentivize efficient use and improve productivity and provide for socially optimal water allocation;
- Apply a human rights-based approach to provide water and sanitation services especially for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples; ensuring full inclusion of women, and youth and other vulnerable groups;
- Build effective, accountable and transparent institutions;
- Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels;
- Establish correspondingly inclusive inter-sectorial, multi-stakeholder decision-making and accountability platforms, designing integrated policies and plans; and
- Harness rapid advancements in technology and innovation to improve water valuation and stewardship and advance and scale solutions for a water resilient future.

Understanding water's multiple uses, values, risks and interconnectivity is one way to fulfil these aims. Water is a connector across sectors and stakeholders. It's a means and a solution. **We, the undersigned representatives of institutions supporting efforts to achieve Agenda 2030, urge greater recognition of the central role of water in achieving our shared global ambitions.**

We are encouraged by the UNGA's establishment of the "International Decade (2018-2028) for Action – Water for Sustainable Development," to advance the global water agenda through policy development and recommendations, partnerships and action plans. We welcome the outcomes of the International High-Level Conference on the "International Decade for Action – Water for Sustainable Development (2018-2028). We laud the recognition at the UN High-level Political Forum on the importance of regular high-level review of SDG6 and of raising commitments to achieve this goal. We welcome the aims of the UNGA to increase political momentum for all SDGs, the Paris Climate Agreement and Sendai Agreement and to build synergies for coherent and efficient implementation of these complementary

and critical agendas.

We pledge our partnership, through the actions articulated in addendum, among others, to support countries and these UN-sanctioned efforts to raise our collective ambition, action and progress on water in Agenda 2030.

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