POLICY BRIEF

Building a resilient future through water

Water is key to the success of all the Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, and therefore essential for delivering on the 2030 Agenda that aims to transform our world into the future we want. To achieve this, a new way of managing water is needed, to make societies more resilient, sustainable and inclusive. This policy brief, which is also an open letter that calls for action, takes a closer look at how this can be achieved.

The future we want, the future we need

The SDGs describe a trajectory for global development where no single goal may be in exclusive focus. 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 common priorities that should guide decisions on development alternatives. In this way, water serves as an exemplary, and most importantly, common and connecting factor providing a coherent basis for decision-making and design to achieve the SDGs. An integrated and holistic approach with water at the heart of policies, planning, actions and investments, provides the foundation for building sustainable, equitable and resilient societies.

Freshwater 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 marine and land ecosystems. It 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. Not least, water is an important factor in the cultural, spiritual and aesthetic lives of billions of people. Sustainable, inclusive and effective governance is a prerequisite to providing water resources and services for all uses and sectors.

Working through water is essential to the delivery of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Ocean Conference Call for Action, as well as the New Urban Agenda. Water can bridge across and enhance these agendas by revealing critical interdependencies, potential synergies, and trade-offs among targets, thereby enabling an integrated and efficient approach to implementation.

Water is key to the success of arguably all other SDGs. Fulfilling the aims of SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation, and other water related targets, would provide enormous 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.

Freshwater, from source to sea, is at the core of the global development agenda. Effective delivery of the targets set for Agenda 2030 requires that we adequately account for the value of water in development and that we ardently build water resilience and, thus, greater water security.

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We are not on track

Delivering on SDG 6 remains a daunting challenge. 69 countries are not on track for achieving basic water coverage for all in 2030. 89 are not on track to meet sanitation targets. The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene reports that 3 in 10, or 2.1 billion people, lack access to safe, readily available, good quality water at home; 6 in 10, or 4.5 billion people lack safely managed sanitation.

To deliver on SDG 6 and other water-related targets, we must bridge the gap between policies and execution in practice. Increased accountability, transparency and participation in water management and governance is imperative to any prospect of progressing on SDG 6 and all water-related goals and agendas. While policies are in place in many countries, broad stakeholder participation varies from moderate to low levels, and only around 25 per cent of examined countries report a high level of participation in any subsector. Furthermore, the degree of influence of people's participation in decision-making needs to be enhanced.

Regulatory functions need to be strengthened, including in peri-urban and rural areas, to overview the continuity and quality of service delivery. Access to information about service performance and actual cost, at national, sub-national and community levels, needs to be improved for water and sanitation services in almost every country. Institutional aspects and inclusive governance are key to the achievement of the SDGs and central to our water aims. Human rights-based approaches must be at the core of the effort to achieve SDG 6. Women, youth, and their organizations should be recognized as key actors and equal partners to achieve SDG 6. 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 these complex challenges.

Financing remains a major deficiency. The estimated costs for achieving the 2030 targets for water and sanitation require a significant increase in levels of investment, the majority of which is expected to come from national budgets (Addis Ababa Action Agenda). At the same time, foreign aid commitments for water have decreased in many regions, thus the efficiency of existing financial resource must be increased. Innovative forms of domestic and international finance are crucial.

The way forward

We, the signatories of this open letter, with a view to enhancing the High-Level Political Forum 2018 review of SDG 6 and other water-related goals and targets, respectfully share key areas of focus and concern that we believe are essential to the effective implementation of the global agendas, to which we pledge our collective support. The UN Water Synthesis report on SDG 6 highlights the need for more and easily accessible data (that is also gender-disaggregated) and strengthened national monitoring systems and capacities to track progress towards achieving SDG 6. This will also help increase the transparency and accountability of decision-making processes, and help build awareness and encourage public, private and civil society engagement. We fully support these important positions and principles.

Furthermore, we do see an increased interest from neighbouring countries around the world on how to handle common water resources. Water will play an even more important role for conflict

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prevention and resolution, with specific regard to SDG 6 target 5 to "implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate".

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 freshwater, 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 pathway to reach human resilience and sustainable development in the modern era.

Achieving sustainability in freshwater systems and related human development aims is hindered by our long-recognized undervaluation of water and freshwater ecosystems. Inadequate valuation and ineffective pricing of water for energy generation, industrial and agricultural activities and domestic uses has led to inefficient water use, high discharges of pollutants, and degraded marine and freshwater systems; all leading to high levels of water stress due too little, too much, or too dirty water.

Valuing water means recognizing and considering all benefits provided by water that encompass economic, social and ecological dimensions. It takes many forms 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 and livelihoods. Valuing water more effectively can make the cost of pollution and waste apparent and promote greater efficiency and better uses. Effective water management presents a transformative opportunity to convert risk to resilience, poverty to well-being, conflicts to cooperation, and degrading ecosystems to sustainable ones. As an outcome of the High-Level Panel on Water, the Valuing Water Leadership Coalition recommends that we find ways to collaborate across sectors to value and manage water more effectively. This will contribute to a deeper understanding and acceptance of the multiple values of water, enable responsible use, and balance different needs and uses, with inclusion and empowerment of all levels of society.

Understanding freshwater'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.

Wise water management must extend beyond political, administrative and geographical boundaries to achieve success and sustainability in human development efforts.

Recommendations

The measures put in place today to manage current and future water stresses will determine our future resilience and well-being. To mitigate and manage potential drivers of water-related conflicts, improve access to services for all, enable better water resources management for people and the environment, and create incentives for water use efficiency and strengthened water security, countries must:

- Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions;
- ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels through enhanced and informed choices, thus ensuring ownership of measures taken;
- 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, improve productivity and provide for socially optimal water allocation;
- apply a human rights-based approach to water and sanitation services and wise water management, especially by and for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups; ensuring full inclusion of other stakeholders, especially women and youth in the decision-making and management;
- establish correspondingly inclusive inter-sectoral, multi-stakeholder decision-making and accountability platforms, and designing integrated policies and plans;
- ensure adequate and complementary financing for progress on water-related SDGs as an essential element in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and all related agendas.

About this publication

The text in this policy brief was presented in May 2018 as an open letter from multi-stakeholder representatives of the water and development community to UN member state representations, UN agencies and other leading global organizations at an event co-organized by the Finnish and the Lebanese permanent representation to the UN in New York. The event was a preparatory meeting for the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development that will review SDG 6 in July 2018 and presented some of the key findings of the UN-Water Synthesis Report on SDG 6.

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