

# LISTENING TO NATIONAL WATER LEADERS: SPECIAL REPORT FOR THE UN 2023 WATER CONFERENCE

## KEY FINDINGS

### IN A NUTSHELL

In the opinion of national water leaders of 92 countries with a combined population of 5.7 billion who participated in this project:

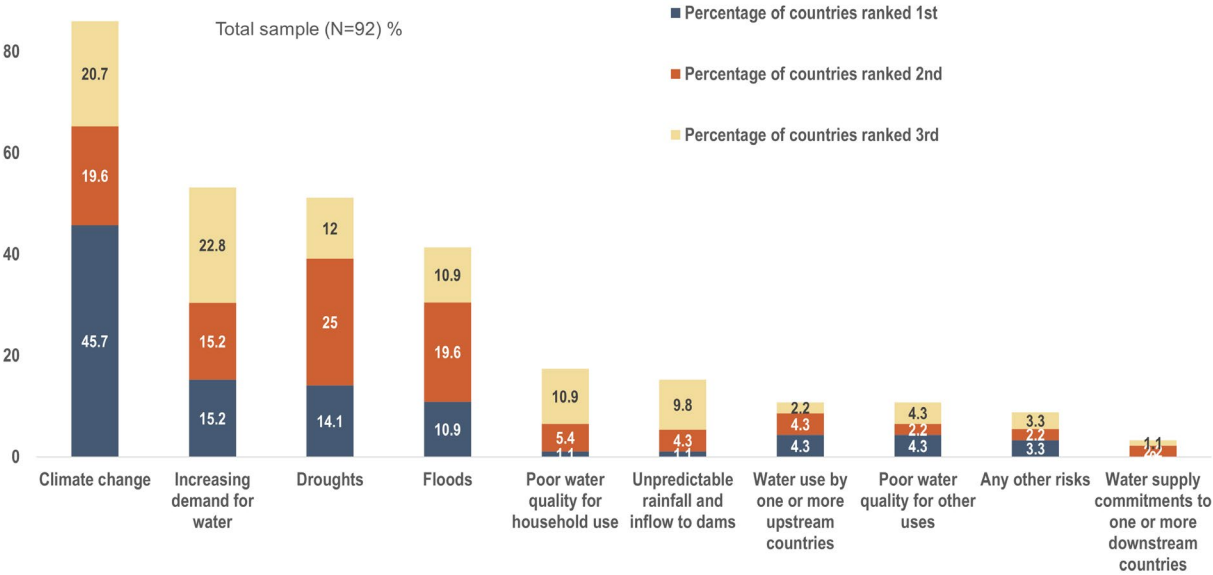
- climate change, climate-related disasters of droughts and floods, and increased demand for water are the greatest risks (generally not within the control of governments) to maintaining or achieving good water management in their country;
- infrastructure, data and institutions are the greatest challenges (within the control of governments) to maintaining or achieving good water management in their country;
- international processes can make the most useful contributions to national progress with water goals by providing a platform for countries to make public water commitments, providing guidance on policy and practice, agreeing on principles and common standards, approaches or procedures, sharing of case studies and best practices, providing scientific information (broadly defined), encouraging interdisciplinary scientific research and development for innovations across sectors, and promoting the importance of water across sectors;
- the most useful international scientific processes are those that can provide water data and information, forecasts, projections and scenarios and monitoring, evaluations and assessments that can be used at a country scale;
- a United Nations platform for countries to make public their intended future actions in relation to water will help raise the priority of water in their government by facilitating better cross-sectoral alignment, and attracting additional funding;
- there are generally not different perceptions within governments about the importance of good water outcomes for achieving other government objectives, specifically public health, food security, energy security, economic development, climate change, environment and disaster risk reduction; and
- where there are the most different perceptions about the importance of water this is due mainly to poor understanding of the role of water, and water responsibilities being too fragmented to enable a common government view on the importance of water to economic development objectives.

## THE PROJECT

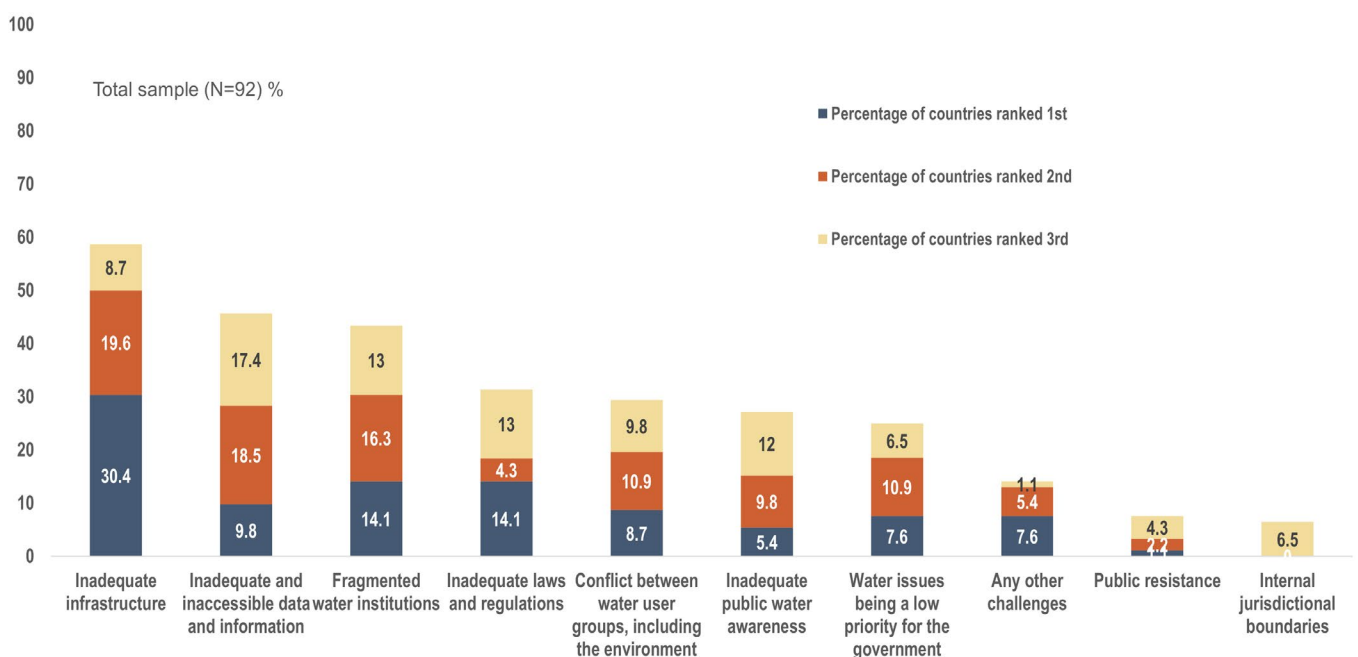
- Following the Preparatory Meeting arranged by the President of the United Nations General Assembly (PGA) in November 2022, invitations were sent by the PGA to all UN member States through UN New York Permanent Representatives for Ministers responsible for water matters or their top officials to respond to a Water Policy Group survey to help inform discussions at the UN 2023 Water Conference.
- The project seeks the opinions and perspectives of national water leaders drawn from their personal experience and aggregates these results at the global level, with potential to break this down by region and by income group. Neither the respondent nor their country is disclosed.
- This is the second of Water Policy Group’s ‘Listening to National Water Leaders’ projects, conducted in partnership with the [University of New South Wales Global Water Institute](#). The first project was conducted in 2021 and resulted in a [global report](#) and separate reports for [Africa](#) and for the [Asia-Pacific](#).
- Ministers, top official and other persons with national water responsibilities and qualifying as ‘national water leaders’ were eligible to complete the survey questionnaire (see attachment).
- Responses are from 92 countries of all regions, 48% of UN member States and with a combined population of 5.7 billion, 73% of the world’s population (see attachment).

## RISKS AND CHALLENGES

- National water leaders were asked to rank what in their opinion are the three greatest risks to maintaining or achieving good water management in their country. “Risks” were defined as matters that generally cannot be directly controlled by the government. Nine possible risks were listed, and space for the respondent to write their own ‘other risks’ if they wished.
- The clear result is the opinion that ‘climate change’ is the greatest risk, with climate related risks of droughts and floods also highly ranked.



- Increasing demand for water is another highly ranked risk.
- This result is even stronger than the first survey, when the same four factors (climate, demand, droughts and floods) dominated the responses.
- Both then and now, these four risks rate much more strongly than any of the others, including transboundary and water quality issues.
- National water leaders were also asked to rank what in their opinion are the three greatest challenges to maintaining or achieving good water management in their country. 'Challenges' were defined as matters largely within the control of their governments. Nine possible challenges were listed, and space provided for 'other challenges' to be written.
- The greatest challenge (i.e., most often ranked in the 'top three' of the ten challenges surveyed) is considered to be 'inadequate infrastructure', with issues with data and institutions also highly ranked.



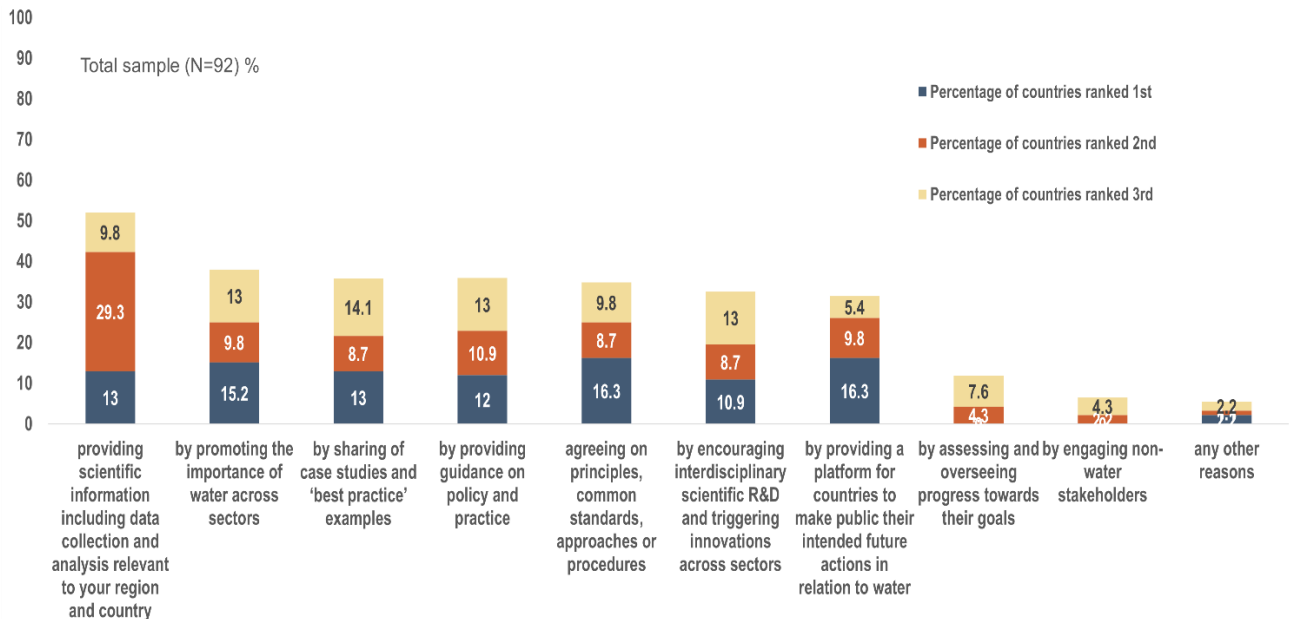
- Issues of fragmentation of water related institutions and responsibilities, while highly ranked, are of relatively less concern than in the previous survey.

## MULTILATERAL PROCESSES

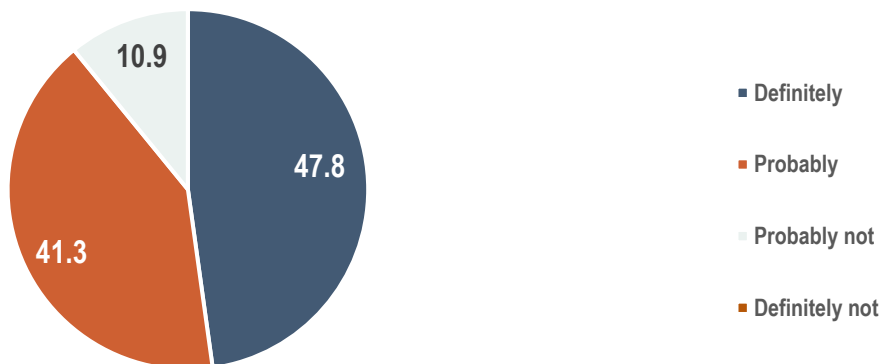
- This is the first time question about the role of United Nations and other international processes has been asked in a 'Listening to National Water Leaders' survey.
- National water leaders were asked to rank up to three types of international processes as to their helpfulness in achieving good water outcomes in their country. Nine processes were listed, and space for the respondent to describe any other processes if they wished. The expression 'good water

outcomes' was defined in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 6, to mean "there is availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all."

- The result strongly affirms the importance of international processes that can deliver scientific information relevant at the country and regional scale, which is the highest ranked (top three) of the most responses and is subject of further findings under 'science processes' below.
- Many other choices also rank highly, validating efforts to broaden the range of international processes that can be mobilised to support national efforts. These include:
  - o providing a platform for countries to make public their intended future actions in relation to water – with further findings on this under 'commitment processes' below;
  - o providing guidance on policy and practice;
  - o agreeing on principles, common standards, approaches or procedures;
  - o sharing of case studies and 'best practice' examples;
  - o providing scientific information including data collection and analysis relevant to your region and country (see more on this below);
  - o encouraging interdisciplinary scientific R&D and triggering innovations across sectors; and
  - o promoting the importance of water across sectors.
- International processes for engagement with non-water stakeholders and monitoring progress towards goals are highest ranked by the fewest responses.

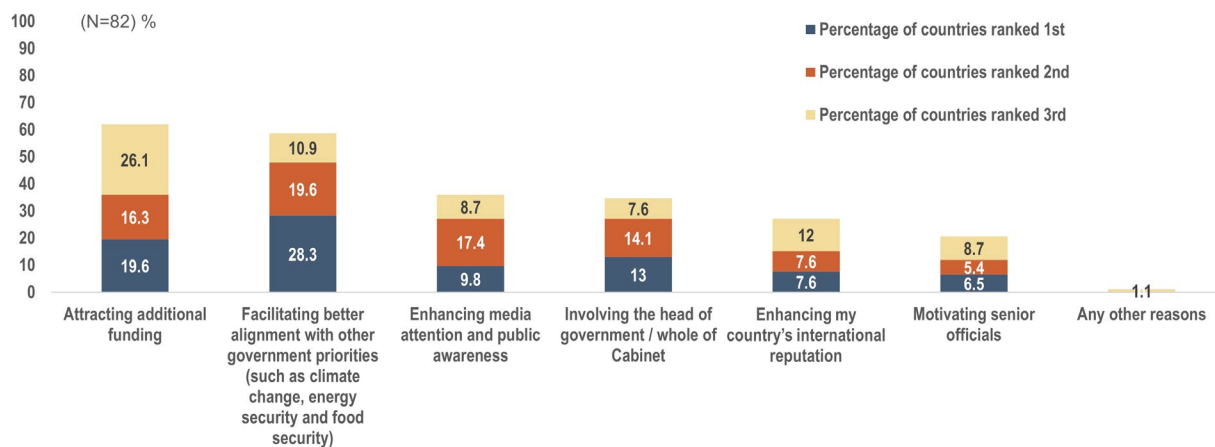


- 'Commitment' processes: On the issue of an international platform for countries to make public their intended future water actions, the great majority of responses (89%) consider this would definitely or probably help raise the priority of water for their government.

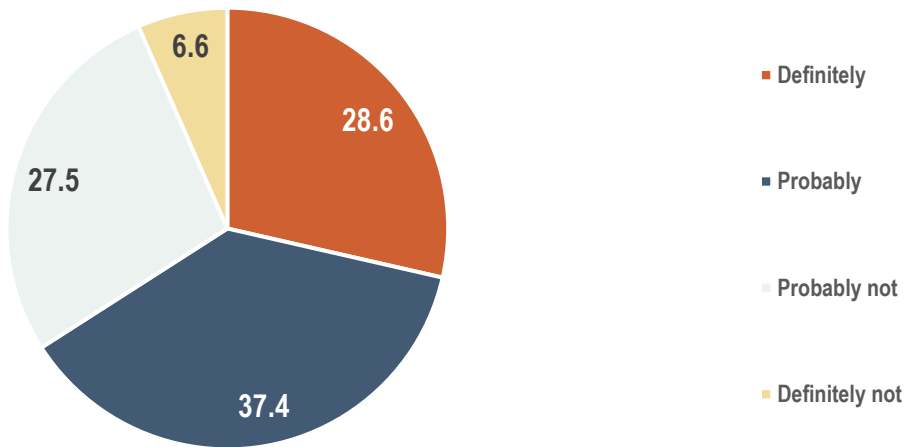


Total sample (N=92) %

- This result holds for all income groups, at 76% even for high income countries and indicates strong support for mechanisms such as The Partnership Platform of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, and the proposed Water Action Agenda.
- When the respondents who answered 'definitely or probably' to this question were also asked what the most useful outcomes at the country level would be from the global exposure of planned national water actions, the most frequently cited benefits were facilitating better cross-sectoral alignment and attracting additional funding.

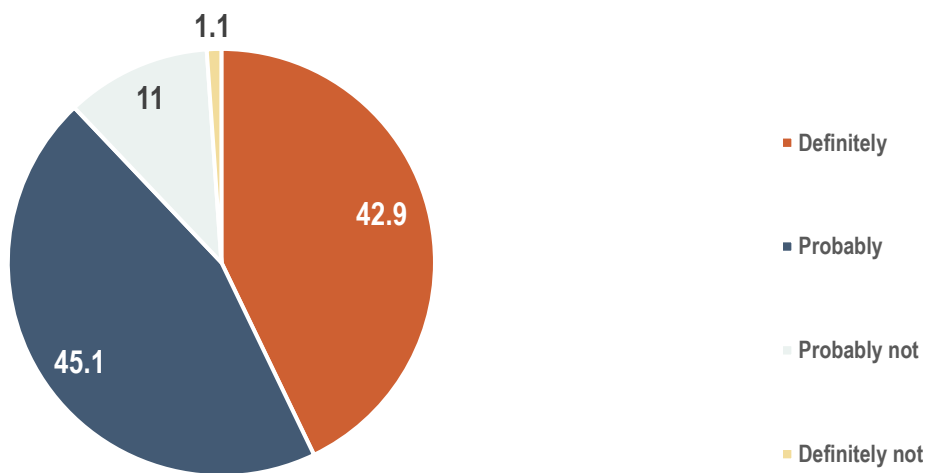


- 'Science' processes: On the issue of an international process for providing scientific information:
- Two-thirds (66%) of responses considered they definitely or probably have access to sufficient scientific services to help achieve good water outcomes in their country.



Total sample (N=91) %

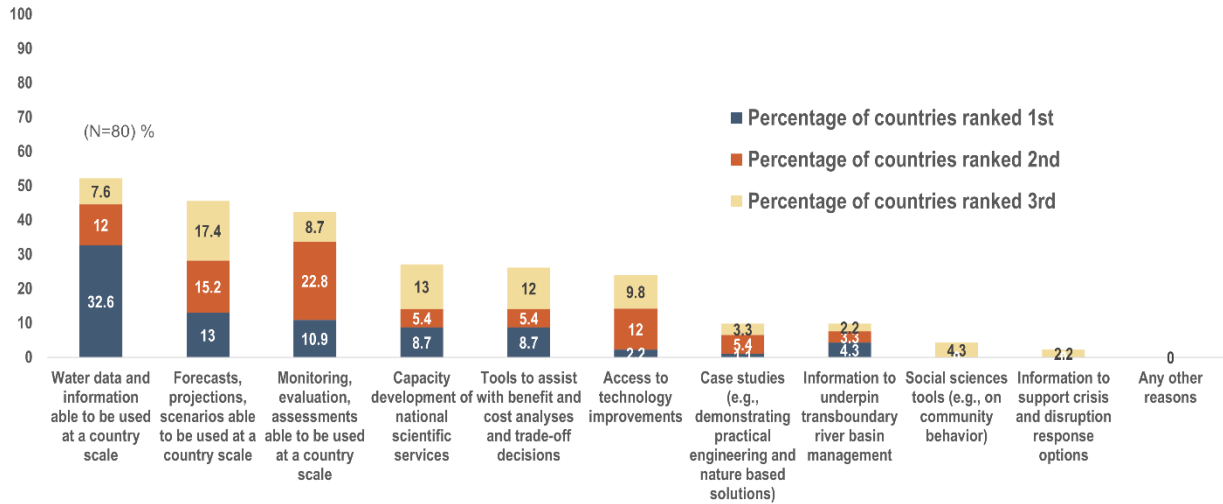
- This outcome is not clearly related to national income as it is distinctly different only for upper middle-income countries.
- However when asked whether information about water at a global and regional scale, prepared through an international science effort (of all relevant sciences, including economics, social sciences and natural sciences) would help achieve improved water outcomes, the overwhelming majority of responses consider that it definitely or probably would help achieve improved water outcomes.



Total sample (N=91) %

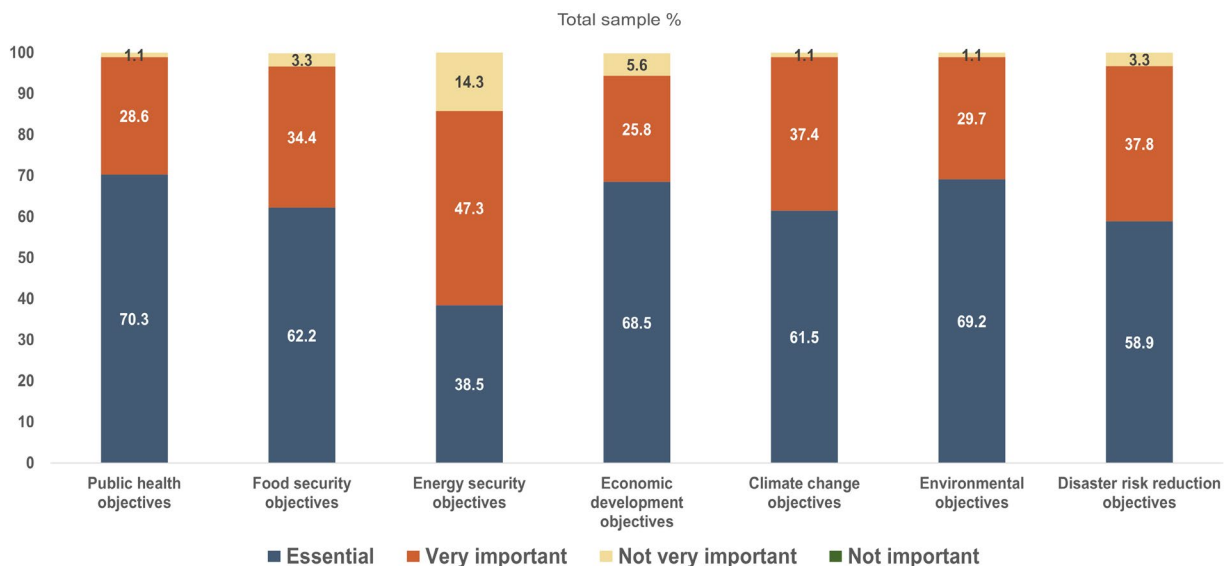
- This result holds for all income groups, 88% of the responses of high income countries consider this would definitely or probably help them, rising to 100% for low income countries.

- When asked to rank the kinds of scientific services from an international science effort that would be most useful for their work, the highest ranked services are 'water data and information' (52% rank as 'top three') 'forecasts, projections and scenarios' (45%) and 'monitoring, evaluations and assessments' (42%) that can be used as a country scale.

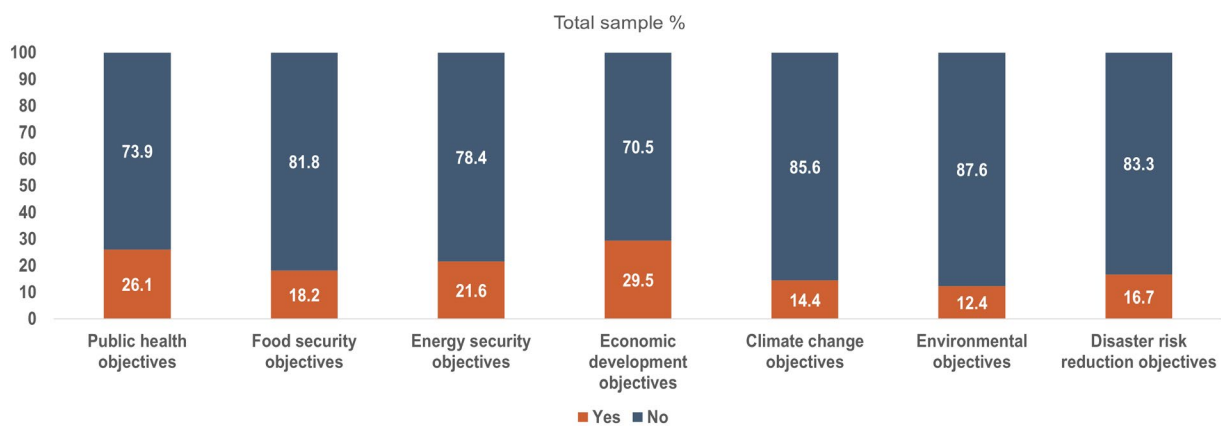


## CROSS-SECTORAL INTEGRATION

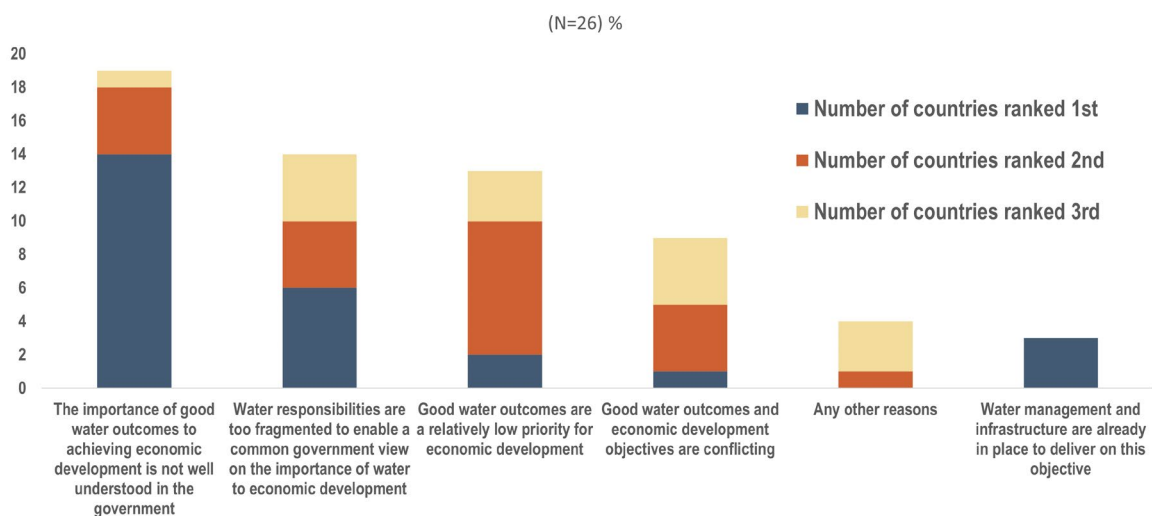
- National water leaders were asked for their opinion on how important are good water outcomes for achieving public health, food security, energy security, economic development, climate change (mitigation and adaptation), environment and disaster risk reduction objectives of their government. The expression 'good water outcomes' was defined in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 6, to mean "there is availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all".
- Importance of 'non-water' objectives to national water leaders: The overwhelming majority of responses (ranging from 88% for energy security up to 99% for climate change and environment), consider good water outcome to be essential or very important for these objectives.



- This result largely applies in all income groups, with the most differentiation in the area of energy security, where a lower proportion of respondents of high income (80%) and upper middle income (76%) countries considered good water outcomes to be essential or very important.
- Importance of water objectives to 'non-water' leaders: National water leaders were also asked whether in their opinion the Minister/s responsible for each of the other (health etc) objectives thinks good water outcomes are less important for achieving their objectives than they do.
- For each of the other objectives, a considerable majority of responses say there are not different perceptions within the government about the importance of water to achieving the 'other' objective. This majority ranged from 88% (environment) down to 70% (economic development) and was not greatly affected by income group.



- Reasons for different perceptions: Respondents who considered there were different perceptions within the government were also asked why they thought this was so by ranking up to three reasons for this.
- Where respondents of 30% of the surveyed countries thought there were different perceptions about the importance of water to 'economic development' objectives, the most frequently ranked reason was that 'importance of good water outcomes to economic development objectives is not well understood in the government', followed by 'water responsibilities are too fragmented to enable a common government view on the importance of water to economic development objectives'.





## **ABOUT THE WATER POLICY GROUP:**

Water Policy Group is a facility for governments and international bodies to access water sector experts with direct experience in working with water policy issues within governments and international bodies. Water Policy Group is comprised of water sector experts who have been decision makers and trusted advisers within governments and international bodies handling complex water policy and strategy. They are able to advise governments and influencers on water policy options and implementation strategies. Members of the Water Policy Group have the common goal that their knowledge, networks and experience can help achieve the sustainable development of water resources.

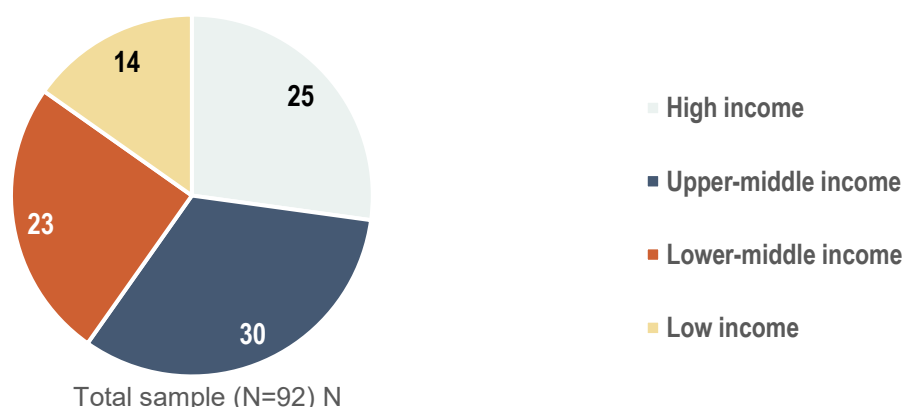
For further information, please contact any member of Water Policy Group or email [info@waterpolicygroup.com](mailto:info@waterpolicygroup.com)

## ATTACHMENT: PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR COUNTRIES

- Ministers, top official and other persons with national water responsibilities and qualifying as 'national water leaders' were eligible to complete the survey questionnaire.
- Participants were asked to describe their role, as either a Minister responsible for water in a national government, head of a national water department or Agency, senior official or advisor responsible for water in a national government or an 'other national water leader role' to be self-described in writing.

N=92	N (%)
Minister responsible for water in a national government	12 (13.0)
Head of a national water department or agency	33 (35.9)
Senior official or advisory responsible for water in a national government	28 (30.4)
Another national water leader role	19 (20.7)

- Participants with 'other roles' were considered to be eligible if their self-description indicated they, (1) are in a national government ministry with responsibilities for water policy, strategy, planning, or coordination, (2) most likely have a high degree of influence over water policy, planning, or coordination at the national level (e.g., due to the small size of the country), or (3) were the responsible Minister or water agency head within the past two years.
- Only one response was analysed for each country. This was the response of the most senior ranked participant. In this report of the key findings, the term 'response' means the response of this person.
- Responses are from 92 countries of all regions, 48% of UN member States and with a combined population of 5.7 billion, 73% of the world's population.
- Responses are well spread regionally and through income groups.



- Three regions (Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and West Asia, and Oceania) returned more than 50% of their countries. Separate reports will be prepared for each of these regions.