

GLOBAL SCAFFOLDING FOR WATER POLICY CONCEPT NOTE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS 2023 WATER CONFERENCE

This proposal is for the preparation and promulgation of agreed policy principles for solving the most sensitive issues in water resources management.

The existence of this material will reduce the political difficulty of decision making on these issues. As such it would provide a safe working space for policy makers just as physical scaffolding does for working on unsafe building sites¹.

The principles would be owned by all the participating governments and operate in conjunction with other game-changing initiatives of the Water Action Agenda, such as national water roadmaps (led by FAO), global water information services (led by WMO), and the science-policy platform for water sustainability (led by UNESCO).

Countries would jointly authorise the preparation of water policy principles and any associated guidance material ('the global products') through a fully inclusive intergovernmental panel. The global products would be prepared professionally under the supervision of an expert group appointed by the panel. When approved by the intergovernmental panel, the global products would be made publicly available, for all governments to use as they wish.

▪ **Rationale**

1. Decisions on water matters usually involve trade-offs and compromises on matters citizens care deeply about and are therefore politically difficult to implement. Classic examples of this are policies on the allocation of water to different public objectives (e.g. food security, clean energy, environment, etc.) in conditions of water scarcity and policies on the pricing of water supply services.
2. There is good evidence that in the opinion of water Ministers and senior national water officials, the main constraint to better water policy outcomes is governance challenges and lack of national priority on water issues, leading to underinvestment and slow implementation (see Global Water Policy Report 2021: Listening to National Water Leaders). This weakens political resolve and deters the public and private investments needed to implement the necessary policies.
3. A key question for multilateral processes on water is how these processes can support national efforts to achieve good results in the face of this constraint. To answer this, Water Policy Group has conducted a second survey of national water leaders asking which of nine kinds of international processes would best help them achieve good water outcomes in their country. Responses were received from national water leaders of 92 countries in all regions and all income groups. Respondents of over a

third of these countries advised that “providing guidance on policy and practice” would be the first, second or third most useful contribution to their work from an international process. A similar proportion cited “agreeing on principles, common standards, approaches or procedure” would be the first, second or third most useful contribution to their work from an international process [Preliminary results. Publication pending].

- **Content**

4. Agreed principles, and associated guidance materials would be prepared that address the known components of comprehensive and effective national water policy. A list of possible policy issues is provided in the Annex, covering policies for achieving sustainable water resource management, policies for achieving water services for all, and policies for achieving integration and alignment with other government policies and priorities.

5. A priority for the proposed process would be to provide policy relevance and support for the other ‘gamechangers’ of the Water Action Agenda. These are expected to include initiatives on national water ‘roadmaps’ (led by FAO), global water information services (led by WMO), and global water science assessments (led by UNESCO). To the extent that implementation of these initiatives requires policy change at the national level, the scaffolding can provide global guidance for this.

6. The resulting documents would be publicly available in all six official UN languages. Relevant content from other global policy-focused initiatives, such as the OECD Principles on Water Governance could be embodied and referenced as agreed by the owners of that material.

7. Capacity building would be managed at the country level, potentially through the SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative, which could coordinate relevant UN system work and connect countries seeking capacity building support with potential providers and donors.

- **Governance and costs**

8. Because the purpose of the proposal is to assist politically difficult decision making at the national level, high level authority for the work program and products will be necessary, with the greatest possible involvement by member States, who would need to jointly ‘own’ the process and its content.

9. It is therefore proposed that the lead institution of the proposed initiative be an inter-governmental panel open to all UN member States, stakeholder bodies active in UN processes in water and organizations responsible for associated initiatives. This panel would have the potential to evolve into a more broadly mandated ‘global water policy platform’, should that be the direction member States wish to take.

10. The panel would supervise the preparation of the principles and any associated guidance materials thereby giving those products joint ownership and political legitimacy. The panel would appoint an expert group of people with lived experience in water policy advising at the national level, and with regional, cultural and ‘hydrological’ diversity, and gender balance, to provide input to and feedback on the drafting process. Stakeholder bodies and organisations responsible for any associated initiatives would be invited to participate in expert group meetings in an advisory capacity.

11. Countries using the scaffolding would be encouraged to report on their experience with it as part of their regular reporting on SDG 6 implementation.
12. The proposed process would need to be supported by a secretariat ideally operating as a UN agency function in an agency with a water policy mandate. It would manage the needs analysis and support the inter-government panel and expert group.
13. Costs would include ensuring the governance processes were as inclusive as possible and engaging expert inputs as required.

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Note 1: 'Scaffolding' is a structure external to a place that makes it safer and easier to work in that place. Applying this to government policy means information, principles and guidance prepared externally that can enable national policy makers to consider options and approaches that would otherwise be too difficult for them to advance. While scaffolding is only required for the 'building phase', this is forever in the case of national policy development and implementation. This is therefore proposed as an ongoing process.

▪ **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.

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Annex: Possible policy topics for global water scaffolding

Achieving sustainable water resource management:

- How to undertake long term water resource planning
- How to allocate water for different purposes.
- How to establish and manage water access rights.
- How to set and regulate for land use and water quality objectives.

Achieving water services for all:

- How to achieve solutions for remote areas and 'last-mile' servicing.
- How to price water services to encourage conservation but allow access for all.
- How to prioritise public funding.
- How to regulate private financing.
- How to undertake network planning.

Achieving both sustainable water resource management and water services outcomes:

- How to get the best institutional arrangements for decision making.
- How to reduce risks of droughts, floods and other water based disasters.
- How to achieve the collection, storage and use of the most necessary data.
- How to achieve all the above with cross-border systems.
- How to ensure the availability of skilled workforces.

Achieving integration with other policies and priorities:

- How to align political incentives to maximize benefits for the greatest number of people
- How to know and consider the consequences for other sectors of water policy and management decisions.
- How to ensure consequences for water of decisions of other sectors are understood and considered.
- How to set infrastructure objectives (eg water security vs flood mitigation vs clean energy production vs environment priorities).
- How to consider the broader costs and benefits of improved water outcomes in budget processes and in national development planning.
- How to ensure water related defence and security risks and opportunities are understood and considered by relevant officials.
- How to ensure water related climate risks and opportunities are understood and considered by relevant officials.