A NEW GLOBAL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE WATER MANAGEMENT: CONCEPT NOTE

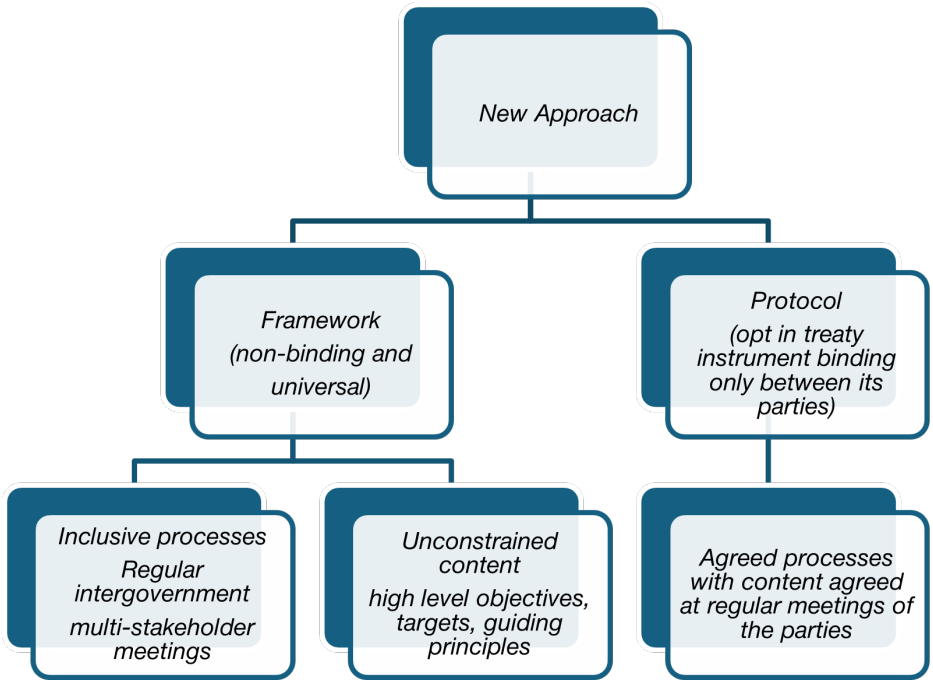
SUMMARY

This paper proposes a way of supporting in-country work to get the best overall outcomes from water management at all levels, in the national interest of all countries and in the global public interest.

We propose **a new global approach** to considering water issues among UN Member States and with non-State actors that would comprise:

- a **comprehensive non-binding water policy framework** setting out high level objectives, targets, guiding principles and priorities at all levels
  - supported by regular inter-governmental meetings; and
  - with participation by civil society and by representatives of the sectors affected by how water is managed (such as agriculture, energy, public health, economic development, and the environment); and

- a **sustainable water management protocol** under which participating countries would voluntarily prepare and agree on principles, guidance and standards that they would endeavour to observe.



In this Concept Note, references to 'water' and 'water management' are intended to encompass all issues in the management of **freshwater** resources, **wastewater** and associated **sanitation** services in accordance with the broad scope of Sustainable Development Goal 6, to "ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030" (SDG 6) and other water-related Sustainable Development Goals.

This approach need not be time limited and would commence whenever agreed. The approach could be embodied in any new arrangements agreed to succeed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030).

This proposal is offered to support discussion on these questions at UN Water Conferences in 2026 and 2028. For the 2026 UN Water Conference, the co-hosts have proposed[i] an Interactive Dialogue on the topic *Water in Multilateral Processes*, as "an opportunity is to identify how water can feature in global processes beyond 2030". This proposal seeks to directly address that question.

WHY A NEW APPROACH AND WHY NOW?

How water is managed affects all major global objectives, including peace, poverty alleviation, public health, disaster risk reduction, food and energy security, mitigating and adapting to climate change, conservation of biodiversity, combatting desertification, and achieving other social, economic and environmental goals. Yet, despite these critical dependencies, many countries, and hence the world as a whole is not on track to achieve SDG 6[ii].

To understand why so many countries are failing on this goal, Water Policy Group sought the opinions of responsible Ministers and senior officials globally. 'National water leaders' of 88 countries of all regions responded, with a large majority saying that most SDG 6 targets were 'impossible or challenging' to achieve and that this was mainly due to the inter-related issues of governance problems and a lack of financing[iii]. Water Policy Group also sought the opinions of national water leaders on their perceptions of the risks and challenges they faced, identifying a range of factors both outside and within the control of governments that were limiting their capacity to maintain or achieve good water management in their countries[iv].

Based on these results, Water Policy Group concludes that sustainable water management may not be achievable under current approaches due primarily to chronic underinvestment in and inadequate regulation of water resources and water services, fragmented governance institutions, and inadequate availability of data and information. National water leaders are facing these challenges while the water resources for which they are responsible are being affected by climate change and are subject to ever-increasing demand.

As a result, achieving sustainable water management is likely to require governments to change their basic water policy settings, such as priorities for water use, and how water services are priced.

Making water policy changes in any country is the responsibility of the relevant national and sub-national governments. Yet, as is the case with other global goals (such as for poverty alleviation, biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation and adaptation), how water is managed in any country also affects other countries with which there are economic and other relationships. Water Policy Group considers that, in varying degrees, all countries have a real interest in everyone else's success, and all countries can benefit from each other's experience and practices. While our survey of national water leaders provides strong evidence of the value of international processes in supporting their in-country responsibilities, there is no current forum where water ministers and other responsible officials can discuss these matters on a regular and ongoing basis[1].

[1] There have ever been only two comprehensive United Nations conferences on water (1977 in Mar del Plata, 2023 in New York). Under *Agenda 2030 Transforming our World,* the sustainable development goal on water is subject to inter-government discussion only every four years, with this primarily aimed at reviewing progress. As a result, water issues are mainly addressed as side issues in other conferences and events, if at all.

The two United Nations conferences on water that have been authorised for 2026 and 2028 are the result of a one-off UNGA resolution. There is no ongoing global scale inter-government process on water that allows for countries to discuss issues as they arise and to authorise an ongoing work programme.

Emerging knowledge of the range and depth of water crises around the world as well as their interdependencies with other critical priorities calls for these kinds of discussions to be not only allowed but to be actively promoted and supported, as they are in other key sectors. **It is time to redress this key gap in the UN's systematic coverage of key global issues.**

Water Policy Group believes these national and collective benefits justify a new global approach that will include agreed objectives, principles and guidance to support countries to achieve the sustainable availability of their water resources.

Water Policy Group is not advocating for the creation of a new global water organisation. We believe the benefits of global cooperation in water matters can be achieved through a comprehensive, inclusive and non-binding global policy framework, and an opt-in protocol under which participating countries can reach formal agreement on key elements.

The Attachment (p.7) sets out our snapshots of what unsustainable water availability looks like, how water can be sustainably managed, and an example of 'interdependency' with water and climate change.

A GLOBAL WATER POLICY FRAMEWORK

Water Policy Group knows[v] decisions on water can be very difficult for governments, often requiring the reconciliation of differing social objectives, such as food security, energy security, water security, economic development, environmental protection, and human rights. To support Ministers and officials responsible for these issues, Water Policy Group has advocated for 'policy scaffolding' in the form of agreed principles and guidance that can provide governments a starting point for considering issues to address and methods to identify and apply the best solutions for their country[vi].

Governments have this kind of support for other core global objectives requiring national action, with many successful examples, such as:

- food security (Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition[vii])
- biodiversity (Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework[viii]); and
- disaster risk reduction (Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction[ix]).

Our proposed new water framework would set out non-binding **objectives, targets, guiding principles** and **priorities** at all levels, and working arrangements that will enable productive discussions on all the key issues, sharing **lessons learned** and **good practices**, and preparation of **guidance materials**.

To facilitate the best exchanging of experience and development of new ideas, the processes of the framework should be **open to non-state actors** who are able and willing to contribute their experience and perspectives. Representatives of 'water dependent' sectors (such as climate, agriculture, energy, environment, economy and health) and of civil society (of the UN Major Groups) should also be encouraged to contribute.

Monitoring in place for SDG 6 can be used to monitor ongoing progess with the new water framework at the national, regional and global level and broken down by any relevant differentiating factors such as national income category and water stress. Further customised indicators may be developed for any elements of the water framework that go beyond the SDG 6 targets. These may also be used at the country level to measure their progress against their national priorities.

Countries would be invited to self report under the Framework as they do in SDG voluntary national reviews and under the Sendai Framework.

A SUSTAINABLE WATER MANAGEMENT PROTOCOL

Given the clear global common interest in all countries succeeding in their water management, there is a strong case to support those countries wishing to **voluntarily reach formal agreement** on the 'policy scaffolding' prepared under the above Framework, maximising the benefits to themselves, their neighbours and regions.

A cost-effective mechanism for this purpose would be to establish a Protocol **under an existing treaty** that already provides a forum for Ministers and officials of the participating governments to do their joint work and has **an existing Secretariat**[2].

Water Policy Group suggests work commence on the preparation of a *Protocol on Sustainable Water Management* under an existing UN treaty with the objective of supporting country efforts to achieve the sustainable management of their water resources. Any UN member State should be entitled to join the Protocol regardless of whether they were also a party to the head Convention.

Based on the common interest principle underpinning the new water protocol, participating countries may agree to the protocol requiring robust, verifiable and open access reporting of:

- progress of each party on the inputs, outputs and outcomes of the new water framework; and
- experience of each party with the principles, guidance and standards agreed under the new water protocol.

All reporting under the new water protocol would be consolidated by the protocol secretariat into reports on the collective progress of all parties for discussion at meetings of the parties. This could be used to compare progress of the protocol parties with overall global progress under the new water framework, and to assist the parties to identify priorities for their collective work.

NEXT STEPS

Countries and organisations are encouraged to consider this approach in their preparations for the *United Nations 2026 Water Conference*. There is time to prepare a draft Framework document that could be discussed at the Conference and reported in its outcomes. The Framework could then be adopted in the UN General Assembly resolution responding to the Conference report.

In parallel, countries wishing to participate in the proposed Protocol could work together to identify the most suitable head convention and prepare an initial draft text.

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[2] Possible United Nations treaties under which such a protocol could be made are any of the Rio Conventions (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which have nearly universal membership and the *Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes* (the Water Convention, also known as *the Helsinki Convention*), which has been open to all UN member States since 2016 and currently has 52 parties. While the Water Convention deals with transboundary issues, protocols on other issues may be made under it. For example, the *Protocol on Water and Health* addresses challenges with water, sanitation and health of a national character.

Water Policy Group stands ready to assist countries in these actions, with independent advice on process and content.

To consult with Water Policy Group on this Concept Note, please contact any of our members.

Water Policy Group
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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. The 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 resource.

REFERENCES

[i] Note by the Secretary-General of the Conference for the Preparatory process of the 2026 United Nations Water Conference

[ii] https://www.unwater.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/UN-Water_SDG6_SynthesisReport_2023.pdf

[iii] Global Water Policy Report 2022

[iv] Global Water Policy Report 2022 chapter 2 and Global Water Policy Report 2023 chapter 2.

[v] Water Policy Reports

[vi] Concept Note on 'policy scaffolding'.

[vii] https://www.fao.org/cfs/policy-products/gsf/en/

[viii] https://www.cbd.int/gbf

[ix] https://www.undrr.org/publication/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030

ATTACHMENT: SNAPSHOTS OF KEY ISSUES

WHAT IS UNSUSTAINABLE WATER MANAGEMENT?

Policies and management systems are not sustainable if they jeopardise capacity to meet basic future water demands. Unsustainability may result from allowing too much water to be diverted and used, insufficient water storage and delivery services, or pollution of available water. For example, taking too much water from natural systems compromises their capacity to deliver their key benefits, which include water filtering and cleaning, water storage, wildlife habitat, and carbon dioxide absorption. Similarly, if natural water supply is polluted, it may become unavailable for use regardless of its quantity.

Affected societies risk losing control of their sovereign function and responsibility to ensure water supply, even for people's basic needs. In these circumstances, Governments may need to re-prioritise public investment to make freshwater from seawater with desalination, transport water long distances, or store seasonal water in ever-larger dams. Countries sharing water in transboundary river basins may be drawn into conflict to safeguard what they see as their fair share.

HOW SUSTAINABLE WATER CAN BE ACHIEVED – INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT BASICS

There is much experience globally in managing water sustainably. Water Policy Group considers that the necessary elements of successful arrangements include:

- data and information sufficient to allow informed decision-making;
- planning and regulatory arrangements that result in water allocation processes that address the society's overall priorities and needs while preserving the capacity of water sources to provide water;
- effective management of water demand, resulting in water being used efficiently and matched to the volume of available supplies, with the most public benefit for every drop of water (including the re-use of water in appropriate situations);
- water and sanitation services for households being available, safe and affordable for them;
- water resources being protected from pollution at source and when in use;
- shared water being subject to formal agreements that are adaptable to social, economic and environmental changes; and
- infrastructure for water storage, delivery, and treatment that is fit for purpose and adaptable to the changing climate.

AN EXAMPLE OF INTERDEPENDENCE: WATER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Sustainable water availability is essential for the resilience of human societies and their capacity to adapt to climate. Yet water is directly affected by climate change, with the warmer and more dynamic atmosphere causing more extreme floods and other rain events and longer and drier droughts, along with less predictable seasonal conditions.[1] Adapting to climate change first and foremost requires adapting to the changing water cycle. Also, many essential measures for mitigating climate change, such as transitioning to clean energy and sequestering greenhouse gases are dependent on water availability.[1] Water conveyance, treatment, and heating, for example, also are contributors to carbon emissions. Sustainable water management can reduce emission directly and indirectly through reduced energy use and enabling cleaner energy sources.

Successfully managing climate and water interdependencies requires local level solutions and is the ultimately the responsibility of national and sub-national governments. Yet all countries have a real interest in everyone else's success, and all countries can learn from each other's experience and practices.

ENDS