

A GLOBAL FRAMEWORK FOR WATER POLICY AND PRACTICE: CONCEPT NOTE

SUMMARY

This paper proposes a way of supporting in-country work to get the best overall outcomes from water management and use¹ at all levels, in the national interest of all countries and in the global public interest.

We propose a **comprehensive non-binding water policy framework** agreed by the UN General Assembly, setting out high level objectives, targets, guiding principles and priorities at all levels, and supported by regular inter-governmental meetings. Civil society and representatives of the sectors affected by how water is managed (such as agriculture, energy, public health, economic development, and the environment) would be encouraged to participate.

This Framework would respond to strong feedback from national water leaders² that the most useful way for international processes to help them to achieve good water outcomes is by providing guidance on water policy and practice. Water Policy Group has long advocated for this kind of support to be available to countries as a form of '**policy scaffolding**' – making it 'safer' to make the difficult decisions required to successfully manage water for the benefit of all citizens.

This water framework could be embodied in any new global arrangements that are agreed to succeed the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This proposal is offered to support discussion on these questions at UN Water Conferences in 2026 and 2028. The 2026 UN Water Conference's Interactive Dialogue on *Water in Multilateral Processes* provides the next opportunity to consider how water can feature in global processes beyond 2030. This proposal seeks to respond directly to this question.

WHY A NEW GLOBAL FRAMEWORK 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 6³.

To understand why so many countries are failing on this goal, Water Policy Group has sought the opinions of responsible Ministers and senior officials globally through three surveys in the past five years, involving 'national water leaders' of all regions and national income categories.

Most recently, while almost all respondents said SDG 6 has been useful for achieving better water outcomes nationally, a significant proportion (averaging around 25%) consider most targets to be impossible to achieve, due to the inter-related issues of governance problems and a lack of financing while coordination remains a challenge at the national level.

Water Policy Group has also gained 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

¹ 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.

² Respondents to Water Policy Group's 3rd Listening to National Water Leaders survey, from 102 countries, with results to be published in the Global Water Policy Report 2026, publication pending.

³ [UN Water SDG6 Synthesis Report 2023](#)

governments that were limiting their capacity to maintain or achieve good water management in their countries.

Water Policy Group interprets from this that most national water leaders think their capacity for achieving sustainable water outcomes is constrained by a range of problems in policy making and implementation while the water resources for which they are responsible are being affected by climate change and are subject to ever-increasing demand. The survey results suggest that national water leaders place particular value on guidance on water policy and practice, especially where such guidance draws on global experience and can help them justify and implement difficult policy choices in-country.

When asked why globally agreed principles, standards and procedures would make it easier for governments to adopt and implement these nationally, the most common response by national water leaders was that this would make it easier for them to justify such principles, standards and procedures in-country. This accords with Water Policy Group's experience with the political difficulty of implementing good water policy and why we have been advocating for 'water policy scaffolding', discussed further below.

While water policy in any country is the responsibility of the relevant national and sub-national governments, the success of these policies also affects other countries with which there are economic and other relationships. Water Policy Group therefore considers that, in varying degrees, all countries have a real interest in everyone else's success in water management. Our surveys also show that national water leaders see real benefits from sharing experience and practices. While our surveys provide 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 basis⁴. Linkage between water and related sectors such as climate change, DRR, and desertification needs to be drastically strengthened.

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 water framework for water that will include agreed objectives, principles and guidance to support countries to achieve the sustainable availability of their water resources.

⁴ There have ever been only two comprehensive United Nations conferences on water, in 1977 (Mar del Plata) and 2023 (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.

FRAMEWORK CONTENT: WATER POLICY SCAFFOLDING

By listening to national water leaders⁵, Water Policy Group knows 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, disaster risk reduction, 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 country⁶.

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)
- biodiversity (Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework); and
- disaster risk reduction (Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction).

The new global framework for water would set out non-binding **objectives, targets, guiding principles and priorities** at all levels, and working arrangements to enable productive discussions of key policy and implementation challenges, the sharing of **lessons learned** and **good practices**, and preparation of **guidance materials** that draw on global experience.

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 where their experience can inform the policy and practice guidance developed under the Framework.

[Monitoring in place for SDG 6](#) and on SDG11.5 (on the effects of natural disasters) can be used to monitor ongoing progress 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 levels of 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 voluntarily report under the Framework, drawing where useful on the experience of [SDG voluntary national reviews](#) and the [Sendai Framework](#) reporting. Further details of how the policy scaffolding could operate, including examples of potential priority topics for the preparation of guidance materials, can be found in [this Concept Note](#).

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](#).

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⁵ [Water Policy Reports](#)

⁶ [Concept Note on ‘policy scaffolding’](#)