

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



SDG 6: Ensure Availability and Sustainable Management of Water and Sanitation for All

Introduction

The sixth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 6) aims to guarantee universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), improve water quality, enhance water-use efficiency, and implement integrated water resources management. Current progress is insufficient to meet the 2030 target, underscoring the need for accelerated global action.

Key Components

The key components of SDG 6 were defined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. It is a global blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet by 2030. At its core are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which address poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and peace.

- **Safe Water Access:** Provide safely managed drinking water services.
- **Sanitation and Hygiene:** Ensure equitable access to adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities, including handwashing stations.
- **Water Quality and Efficiency:** Reduce pollution, treat wastewater, and improve water-use efficiency to mitigate scarcity.
- **Resource Management:** Protect and restore water-related ecosystems and adopt integrated water resource management at all levels.
- **International Cooperation:** Strengthen global partnerships and capacity-building for water and sanitation initiatives in developing countries.

Challenges and Progress

Progress on delivering SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) is currently too slow to meet the 2030 targets, with 2.2 billion people lacking safe drinking water and 3.4 billion lacking safe sanitation in 2024. While access to basic services increased from 69% to 73% between 2015 and 2022, current rates need to accelerate by up to 6 times to deliver SDG 6. Key challenges include climate-driven water scarcity, pollution, underfunding, and infrastructure gaps, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

- **Current Situation:** Billions lack safe drinking water and sanitation. Water scarcity and pollution are worsening due to climate change and conflict.

- **Progress:**
 - 74% of the global population uses safely managed drinking water.
 - 58% use safely managed sanitation services.
 - 71% have access to handwashing facilities at home.
- **Urgent Action Needed:** Achieving SDG 6 requires a six-fold increase in progress on drinking water, five-fold for sanitation, and eight-fold for hygiene. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for transformative improvements.

Target	Description	Indicator(s)
6.1	By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.	6.1.1: Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services.
6.2	By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, paying special attention to women, girls, and vulnerable groups.	6.2.1a: Proportion of population using safely managed sanitation services. 6.2.1b: Proportion of population with a handwashing facility with soap and water at home.
6.3	By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping, and minimising the release of hazardous chemicals.	6.3.1: Proportion of domestic and industrial wastewater safely treated. 6.3.2: Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality.
6.4	By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency and ensure sustainable withdrawals to address water scarcity.	6.4.1: Change in water-use efficiency over time. 6.4.2: Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available resources.
6.5	By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including transboundary cooperation.	6.5.1: Degree of integrated water resources management implementation. 6.5.2: Proportion of transboundary basin area with operational arrangements for water cooperation.
6.6	By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems (rivers, wetlands, lakes, aquifers).	6.6.1: Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time.
6. a	Expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water and sanitation-related activities.	6.a.1: Amount of water- and sanitation-related official development assistance that is part of a government-coordinated spending plan.

Target	Description	Indicator(s)
6.b	Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in water and sanitation management.	6.b.1: Proportion of local administrative units with established policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management.

The table above reflects the 8 targets and 11 global indicators for SDG 6.

SDG 6 and UNEP Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) 2026-2029

The UNEP Medium-Term Strategy aims to accelerate progress on SDG 6 by addressing the water-related impacts of the [triple planetary crisis](#)—climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. It focuses on improving water quality, managing ecosystems, and strengthening governance to ensure sustainable water management by 2030, in line with the [SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework](#).

Key Aspects of UNEP's SDG 6 Strategy

- **Targeted Indicators:** UNEP acts as custodian for key SDG 6 indicators, focusing on water quality (6.3.2), integrated water resources management (6.5.1), and water-related ecosystems (6.6.1).
- **Addressing Crisis Impacts:** The strategy combats the declining availability, quality, and distribution of water caused by pollution, climate change, and habitat loss.
- **Acceleration Framework:** Activities focus on five pillars to speed up progress: funding, data/information, capacity development, innovation, and governance.
- **Ecosystem Management:** A key focus is restoring water-related ecosystems (e.g., wetlands, forests) to enhance water purification and quality.
- **Data and Monitoring:** UNEP strengthens the evidence base for decision-making through the [Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6](#).

Context for Strategy

As of mid-2024, SDG 6 was alarmingly off-track, requiring accelerated efforts to achieve universal access to water and sanitation by 2030. The 2026-2029 strategy aims to fix these gaps by fostering institutional coherence and sustainable, nature-based solutions.

Relevant linkages with other SDGs

SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) acts as a critical enabler for the entire 2030 Agenda, with strong, positive interlinkages with health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), agriculture (SDG 2), and energy (SDG 7). Safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)

directly reduce disease, empower women, improve agricultural productivity, and support sustainable energy production.

Key interlinkages with other Sustainable Development Goals include:

- **SDG 1 (No Poverty) & SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities):** Water scarcity and lack of sanitation disproportionately affect marginalised, poor populations, making WASH access essential for reducing poverty and inequality.
- **SDG 2 (Zero Hunger):** Agriculture accounts for the vast majority of water withdrawals; thus, sustainable water management (6.4) is directly tied to food security.
- **SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being):** Clean water and sanitation are fundamental to preventing diseases like cholera, directly affecting global health and reducing pressure on health systems.
- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality):** Access to water reduces the time women and girls spend collecting water, improving their health and enabling participation in education and economic activities.
- **SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy):** Water is required for energy production (hydropower, cooling), while energy is required for water treatment and distribution.
- **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities), 14 (Life Below Water), & 15 (Life on Land):** Protection of water-related ecosystems (6.6) supports biodiversity, while wastewater management (6.3) reduces pollution in oceans and on land.
- **SDG 13 (Climate Action):** Sustainable water management is crucial for climate change adaptation and resilience.

Key Science Reports for SDG 6

The key UN reports for SDG 6 include:

1. High-Level Synthesis and Progress Reports

- **SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2023 - Blueprint for Acceleration:** A comprehensive analysis published at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda. It offers a strategic, evidence-based roadmap for accelerating progress, focusing on accelerating action across finance, data, capacity, innovation, and governance.
- **SDG 6 Progress Reports (Annual Updates):** These, such as the 2024 updates, are based on data from the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-SDG6). They provide data-driven insights into the 11 indicators of SDG 6.

- **SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2026 (Forthcoming):** Designed as the collective input of the UN system for the 2026 High-level Political Forum (HLPF), evaluating a decade of implementation.

2. Specific Indicator/Sector Reports (UN-Water/Custodian Agencies)

- **WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) Reports:** Focus on WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) in households, schools, and health care facilities (Indicators 6.1.1 and 6.2.1).
- **UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS):** Focuses on the "means of implementation," such as finance and human resources for WASH (Indicators 6. a and 6.b).
- **Progress on Ambient Water Quality (UNEP):** Analyses Indicator 6.3.2 regarding the proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality.
- **Progress on Wastewater Treatment (WHO/UN-Habitat):** Focuses on Indicator 6.3.1, tracking the safely treated portion of wastewater.
- **Progress on Water-Use Efficiency and Water Stress (FAO):** Covers Indicator 6.4.1 and 6.4.2.
- **Progress on Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) (UNEP):** Focuses on Indicator 6.5.1.
- **Progress on Transboundary Water Cooperation (UNECE/UNESCO):** Covers Indicator 6.5.2.
- **Progress on Water-related Ecosystems (UNEP):** Tracks Indicator 6.6.1, including changes in wetlands and forests.

Funding SDG 6

Funding for all the SDGs has been framed by the Addis Ababa 4th Financing for Development Conference. One missed opportunity in the 2015 Addis Ababa process was not identifying what each SDG funding stream would need.

Key Requirements to Finance SDG 6

- **Massive Investment Increase:** The annual cost for water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) targets is \$114 billion. Including water resources management, the costs could exceed \$1 trillion annually.
- **Closing the Financial Gap:** Current financing is insufficient, with the need to triple or quadruple investment, particularly for infrastructure construction, operation, and maintenance.

- **Diverse Funding Sources (The "3Ts"):**
 - **Taxes:** Public budget allocation from governments.
 - **Tariffs:** Fees paid by users for services.
 - **Transfers:** Overseas development assistance, international aid, and remittances.
- **Innovative Financing and Blended Finance:** Utilising public-private partnerships, sustainable bonds, and blended finance to reduce investment risks and attract commercial capital.
- **Improved Efficiency and Governance:** Enhancing the efficiency of spending to maximise existing funds. This involves strengthening legal frameworks, reducing corruption, and promoting transparency.
- **Addressing Regional Needs:** Addressing high per-capita costs in small island developing states and high-need, low-resource settings.
- **Climate-Resilient Infrastructure:** Investing in infrastructure that can withstand climate shocks, which is crucial for long-term sustainability.

Main Sources of Funds

- **Taxes:** Revenue from the government for public goods.
- **Transfers:** International aid and donations.
- **Tariffs:** User fees for water and sanitation services.
- **Repayable Financing:** Loans and equity.

SDG 6 and Just Transition

SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) contributes to a [just transition](#) by ensuring equitable access to water resources, which is essential for sustainable economic development, health, and climate resilience. It supports a fair transition to a green economy by protecting vulnerable communities, improving industrial water efficiency, and fostering, as described by the [UN-Water](#) reports. Key contributions include:

- **Equitable Access:** Ensuring safe, affordable drinking water and sanitation, particularly for women, girls, and vulnerable populations, which reduces inequality.
- **Climate Adaptation & Resilience:** Promoting sustainable water management, which is critical for adapting to climate change, as highlighted by the [High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#).

- **Environmental Protection:** Restoring water-related ecosystems (e.g., wetlands, rivers) and reducing pollution.
- **Sustainable Growth:** Driving, as explained in the UN-Water report, increased water-use efficiency across sectors.

By integrating water management into climate action, SDG 6 ensures that the transition to a low-carbon economy does not exacerbate existing inequalities.

UN Water and Partnerships and Commitments

UN Water: UN-Water coordinates the United Nations’ work on water and sanitation.

There is no single United Nations Agency, Fund, or Programme dedicated exclusively to water issues. In fact, over 30 United Nations organisations carry out water and sanitation programmes because these issues run through all of the United Nations’ main focus areas.

UN-Water is a ‘coordination mechanism. It comprises United Nations entities (Members) and international organisations (Partners) working on water and sanitation issues. Their focus is on supporting countries to deliver progress on water and sanitation.

UN-Water’s role is to ensure that Members and Partners ‘deliver as one’ in response to water-related challenges.

UN-Water focuses on three core areas of work:

1. Informing policy processes and addressing emerging issues
2. Supporting monitoring and reporting on water and sanitation
3. Building knowledge and inspiring people to take action

UN-Water’s activities are guided by the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation, launched in 2024, which aims to accelerate action towards Sustainable Development Goal 6 - “to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” - as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

UN-Water’s Members and Partners have helped place water and sanitation at the heart of milestone agreements, such as the 2015-2030 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, and the 2015 Paris Agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Partnerships and Commitments: The delivery of each Sustainable Development Goal and its targets cannot be achieved by governments alone. In 1992, the UN Earth Summit identified nine stakeholder groups to help implement its outcomes, and that approach

was further developed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 and at Rio+20 in 2012.

For the Sustainable Development Goals, we saw an acceleration in the number of multi-stakeholder partners. You can find over 1800 [SDG6 partnerships here](#). Also, the [Progress in WASH Services \(2015-2024\) Report](#).

Examples of SDG 6 partnerships:

- **UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-SDG6)**: An inter-agency partnership led by UN-Water that coordinates efforts among UN agencies to improve the availability of high-quality data for SDG 6, reducing the reporting burden on countries.
- **SDG 6 IWRM Support Programme**: Coordinated by the Global Water Partnership (GWP), this programme helps countries implement sustainable and equitable water resource management by advancing the implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM).
- **World Vision**: A non-governmental organisation that partners with national and local governments to provide water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services, with a focus on reaching vulnerable populations.
- **Beverage Industry Environmental Roundtable (BIER)**: A group of beverage companies collaborating to address water stewardship, including efforts to improve water efficiency and wastewater treatment.
- **Water For People**: This organisation co-founded the [One For All global alliance](#) with its partner IRC to collectively advance SDG 6 through local, national, and international strategies.

Key events for Water in preparation for the 2027 High-Level Review of the SDGs

February 24-27: HLPF regional meeting Asia-Pacific (ESCAP Bangkok, Thailand)

March 3-6: UN Statistical Commission

March 31-2 April: HLPF regional meeting Western Asia (ESCWA Beirut, Lebanon - tentative)

April 13-17: HLPF regional meeting Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC Santiago, Chile)

April 21-22: HLPF regional meeting Europe and Central Asia (UNECE Geneva, Switzerland)

April 28-30: HLPF regional meeting Africa (ECA Kampala, Uganda)

May 6-7: 11th Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals.

July 6-15: UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development:

The theme of the HLPF will be “Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals for a sustainable future for all”. The 2026 HLPF, with full appreciation for the integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the Sustainable Development Goals, will conduct in-depth reviews of SDG 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; SDG 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all; SDG 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation; SDG 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable; and SDG 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

December 2-4: UN Water Conference 2026 (UAE)

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation is an essential end in itself and is also critical to progress on the 2030 Agenda as a whole. As we enter the final 5 years of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, the world must surge investment, innovation, political will, and a spirit of solidarity into SDG 6. The 2026 United Nations Water Conference, co-hosted by the United Arab Emirates and Senegal and convened in the UAE from 2-4 December 2026, will bring this spirit of solidarity to life and help build a water-secure future for all.

Previous key events

March 22-24, 2023: UN Water Conference 2023

Vision: The Netherlands and Tajikistan, as co-hosts of the Conference, will strive to make the Conference a watershed moment for the world. Our vision for the Conference is that we all fundamentally understand, value, and manage water better and take concerted action to achieve the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While the Water Action Decade is an essential enabler for the 2030 Agenda, including SDG 6, further strengthening a UN system-wide approach to water is necessary to achieve

water-related goals and targets and to reinforce the international water voice and cross-sectoral connections.

The preparatory process for the Conference was grounded in a foundation of consistency, continuity, and commitment, ensuring that coalitions forged, opportunities identified, and promises made can lead to impactful results, replication, and scaling up, and that 2023 is indeed the springboard for catalysing action for water security for all.

Both the preparatory process and the Conference highlighted commitments that deliver impact and set a clear agenda for the second half of the Decade and beyond, through 2030, while promoting a longer-term approach and perspective. To scale up commitments, including concrete actions and agreements, an effort will be made to promote successful and scalable solutions.

UN Water Decade: (2018-2028)

In December 2017, UN Member States adopted United Nations General Assembly resolution 71/222 on an International Decade for Action on ‘Water for Sustainable Development’ 2018-2028. In response to the ambitious 2030 Agenda, the Water Action Decade will accelerate efforts towards meeting water-related challenges, including limited access to safe water and sanitation, increasing pressure on water resources and ecosystems, and an exacerbated risk of droughts and floods.

Previous United Nations initiatives included the United Nations Water Conference (1977), the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990), the International Conference on Water and the Environment (1992), the Earth Summit (1992) and the International Decade for Action “Water for Life”, 2005-2015.

Recent milestone agreements include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 2015-2030 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, and the 2015 Paris Agreement within the UN Convention Framework on Climate Change.

Stakeholder Engagement

UNDESA, serving as Secretariat for the UN 2023 Water Conference, released a Summary Report detailing stakeholder engagement activities conducted before and during the event (22-24 March 2023, UN Headquarters, New York). These activities aimed to raise awareness, disseminate information, and provide opportunities for stakeholders to actively participate in the preparatory process and the Conference.

The UN resolution that identified that the conference should involve all relevant stakeholders including non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations,

academic institutions, the scientific community, the private sector, philanthropic organizations and other actors to assess challenges and opportunities relating to, as well as support further action to implement, the objectives of the Decade and the water-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.