

2026 United Nations Water Conference

Interactive Dialogue 3

Water for planet: climate, biodiversity, desertification, environment, source to sea, resilience and disaster risk reduction;

I. Introduction (500 words)

Water is the foundation of life, development, and resilience. It sustains ecosystems, enables socio-economic development, and underpins human health and well-being. From ancient civilizations to modern economies, water has shaped societies and continues to determine the prospects for peace, stability, and prosperity. Today, however, the world faces a global water and environmental crisis that threatens to undermine hard-won development gains and the collective achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, and growing disaster risks converge through water, making it the central medium through which people, ecosystems, and economies experience planetary challenges.

Looking ahead to the UN 2026 Water Conference, the scope of the interactive dialogue has been expanded and renamed “Water for Planet.” This evolution reflects the growing recognition that water connects all dimensions of planetary health: it is central to climate stability, biodiversity protection, land and soil productivity, disaster resilience, and ocean health from source to sea.

This interactive dialogue should aim to position water as the linchpin for planetary resilience and sustainability. The interactive dialogue should serve as a platform not only to assess challenges and share knowledge but also to generate transformative commitments, practical solutions, and inclusive partnerships. It should advance integrated approaches that bridge sectors and agendas, recognizing water’s role as a unifying element in the global response to interconnected crises. In doing so, the interactive dialogue should highlight the perspectives of developing countries, particularly those in arid and water-stressed regions, and to advocate for inclusivity, cooperation, and solidarity in global water governance.

This concept paper is structured into six sections: introduction; status and trends; challenges and emerging issues; solutions; recommendations; and guiding questions. Together, they propose pathways for action, and identify opportunities for international

cooperation. Above all, the paper reflects the conviction that water must be elevated as a global priority—an entry point for climate action, biodiversity protection, and sustainable development, and a cornerstone for peace and resilience in a rapidly changing world.

II. **Status and trends** (1000 words)

The global water cycle is experiencing profound disruption, driven by climate change, environmental degradation, and unsustainable human activities. These trends not only challenge water security but also affect biodiversity, energy systems, agriculture, disaster resilience, and overall human development. Understanding the current status of water resources and associated ecosystems is critical for shaping effective strategies in the “Water for Planet” dialogue.

1. Water Availability and Scarcity

Water scarcity is intensifying worldwide. Today, more than two billion people live in regions experiencing high water stress, and this number is expected to rise significantly by 2050 due to population growth, urbanization, and climate change. Over half of the world’s aquifers are being depleted faster than they are replenished, undermining long-term sustainability. In the Middle East and North Africa, where per capita water availability is already the lowest in the world, scarcity has reached crisis levels.

2. Climate Impacts on Hydrological Systems

Climate change is the defining driver of water insecurity. Altered precipitation patterns, prolonged droughts, extreme floods, accelerated glacier melt, and rising sea levels are disrupting hydrological systems worldwide. Nine out of ten natural disasters recorded over the past decade were water-related. River basins, especially in Africa and Asia, are increasingly exposed to unpredictable seasonal variability, complicating planning for agriculture, energy generation, and water supply. Coastal aquifers are under threat from saltwater intrusion as sea levels rise, a trend particularly concerning for deltaic countries.

3. Degradation of Freshwater Ecosystems

Freshwater ecosystems—rivers, lakes, wetlands, and aquifers—are declining faster than any other ecosystem type. Globally, over 50% of countries report degradation in at least one water-related ecosystem. Since 1970, populations of freshwater species have declined by 81%, reflecting severe biodiversity loss. Wetlands, which act as natural water filters, buffers against floods, and carbon sinks, have lost 85% of their historical area.

Deforestation and unsustainable land use further exacerbate degradation by increasing soil erosion, disrupting hydrological cycles, and reducing water quality.

4. Water Quality Decline

Water quality is deteriorating at alarming rates. Agricultural runoff, industrial effluents, and untreated sewage are contaminating rivers, lakes, and aquifers, making them unsafe for human and ecological use. One-third of rivers in developing countries are heavily polluted, threatening food safety and public health. Groundwater, which supplies drinking water to billions of people, is increasingly contaminated by nitrates, heavy metals, and pathogens. Coastal and marine ecosystems are also suffering from nutrient pollution and untreated wastewater discharge, undermining fisheries and coral reefs.

5. Rising Disaster Risk

Water-related disasters are the most frequent and costly natural hazards. Between 2010 and 2019, nearly 95% of global infrastructure losses were linked to water-related disasters. From 2000 to 2020, more than 3 billion people were affected by droughts and floods. Extreme hydrological events disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, including women, children, the elderly, indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) face heightened risks due to limited adaptive capacity and resources.

6. Transboundary Water Challenges

There are more than 270 transboundary river basins worldwide, collectively supporting 40% of the global population. Yet, only half of these basins have operational frameworks for joint monitoring, data sharing, or coordinated risk management. In Africa, the Nile Basin exemplifies both the challenges and opportunities of transboundary cooperation. Competing demands for water, combined with climate pressures, require cooperative approaches and abidance by international law to avoid conflict and build shared resilience.

7. Interlinkages with Climate, Biodiversity, and Development Agendas

Water connects directly to the broader global agenda. Progress on SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) is critical for advancing SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water), SDG 15 (life on land), SDG 11 (sustainable cities), and SDG 2 (zero hunger). Yet, the world is off track to achieve water-related SDG targets by 2030. Water also underpins the Paris Agreement, the Global Biodiversity Framework, the Sendai Framework, and the

UNCCD's land degradation neutrality goals. A failure to address water challenges jeopardizes the success of these international commitments.

8. Financing Gaps and Investment Needs

Meeting global water challenges requires significant investment. Estimates suggest that between \$6.7 trillion by 2030 and \$22.6 trillion by 2050 will be needed to meet water-related goals. Yet, water receives only about 3% of total climate finance. Current financing mechanisms are fragmented, often inaccessible to vulnerable countries, and fail to reflect the true value of water-related ecosystems. Bridging this financing gap is essential to achieving resilience.

9. Technological and Knowledge Advances

Despite the challenges, technological innovation offers opportunities. Advances in remote sensing, data analytics, artificial intelligence, and early warning systems are enhancing water monitoring and management. Digital twins of river basins, smart irrigation systems, and predictive climate models provide new tools for decision-makers. However, access to these technologies remains uneven, particularly in developing countries. Closing this gap requires capacity-building and international cooperation.

10. Equity and Inclusion

Water insecurity is not distributed evenly. Marginalized groups—including rural communities, women, youth, and indigenous peoples—often face the greatest risks while having the least voice in decision-making. Inclusive governance, gender-responsive policies, and youth engagement are increasingly recognized as essential elements of sustainable water management.

III. **Challenges and emerging issues** (2000 words):

The global water crisis continues to deepen, but since the UN 2023 Water Conference, several challenges have become more urgent and intertwined. The broadening of the interactive dialogue from “Water for Climate, Resilience and Environment” to “Water for Planet” asserts that water is now at the center of planetary health, connecting climate stability, biodiversity, desertification, disaster resilience, and ocean health. This section outlines the key challenges and emerging issues while also identifying opportunities for action and the interlinkages between water-related SDG targets and the broader 2030 Agenda.

1. Intensifying Climate Variability and Extreme Events

Since 2023, climate extremes have accelerated. Prolonged droughts, catastrophic floods, and record-breaking heatwaves have highlighted water's role as a main channel through which climate change impacts societies. Accelerated glacier melt and reduced snowpack in critical mountain regions threaten downstream water security for billions. Coastal aquifers are increasingly exposed to saltwater intrusion, threatening deltas and small island states.

Opportunity: Scaling up universal early warning systems and anticipatory action—especially for vulnerable countries—can reduce human and socio-economic losses. This aligns with SDG 13 on climate action and SDG 11 on sustainable cities.

2. Biodiversity Loss and Ecosystem Degradation

Freshwater biodiversity is declining at twice the rate of terrestrial or marine biodiversity. Wetlands, rivers, and aquifers continue to be degraded, with devastating impacts on water quality, resilience, and carbon storage. Since 2023, new assessments have revealed alarming freshwater species declines and accelerated wetland loss, undermining both climate adaptation and biodiversity goals.

Opportunity: Protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems provides co-benefits for SDG 6 (clean water), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water), and SDG 15 (life on land).

3. Desertification and Land Degradation

The expansion of deserts and degradation of soils are intensifying pressure on water resources. In Africa and the Middle East, desertification reduces agricultural productivity, exacerbates water scarcity, and increases rural poverty. Since 2023, prolonged drought cycles in the Horn of Africa and North Africa have revealed the fragility of ecosystems and food systems.

Opportunity: Integrated land and water management—linking SDG 6 and SDG 15—offers solutions through sustainable land-use, soil restoration, and climate-resilient agriculture.

4. Water Quality and Pollution

Water quality has deteriorated further since 2023. Agricultural runoff, industrial effluents, and untreated sewage increasingly pollute rivers, lakes, and aquifers. Emerging pollutants, including microplastics and pharmaceuticals, have been detected in freshwater and marine environments, with consequences for health and biodiversity.

Opportunity: Advancing wastewater treatment and circular water use directly supports SDG 6.3 (water quality), while reducing ocean pollution links water governance with SDG 14 (life below water).

5. Rising Disaster Risk and Loss and Damage

Ninety percent of disasters are now water-related. Since 2023, the frequency of mega floods and multi-year droughts has increased, causing severe socio-economic losses. Groups in vulnerable situations—particularly in LDCs, SIDS, and arid regions—remain disproportionately affected. While UNFCCC COP27 established a fund for loss and damage, mechanisms for financing water-related loss and damage remain limited.

Opportunity: Integrating water into loss-and-damage frameworks can unlock finance for resilience-building, while addressing SDG 1 (poverty reduction) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

6. Fragmented Governance and Policy Silos

Despite lately incorporating water issues into the climate agenda, starting with COP27, water continues to be poorly managed in conjunction to climate, biodiversity, and land policies. Since 2023, there has been progress in some countries in mainstreaming integrated water resources management (IWRM), but overall, fragmentation persists. Transboundary basins remain under-governed, with insufficient cooperation frameworks, exacerbating risks of conflict.

Opportunity: Strengthening cross-sectoral governance aligns with SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and enhances progress on SDG 6.5 (IWRM and transboundary cooperation).

7. Financing Gaps and Investment Shortfalls

Global financing needs for water are projected at \$6.7 trillion by 2030. Yet, water-related adaptation continues to receive less than 3% of climate finance. Since 2023, the financing gap has widened as competing crises—energy, debt, and food—strain national budgets.

Opportunity: Mobilizing finance through innovative instruments (green bonds, blended finance, ecosystem service payments) links SDG 6 financing with SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). 8. Inequality, Gender, and Social Dimensions

Water insecurity perpetuates inequality. Since 2023, humanitarian crises in drought- and flood-affected regions have disproportionately impacted women and children. Indigenous peoples and rural communities remain marginalized in decision-making processes.

Opportunity: Empowering women, youth, and indigenous communities in water governance not only advances equity but also enhances resilience. This strengthens SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).9. New and Emerging Issues

Pandemics and health risks: COVID-19 underscored water's role in hygiene and resilience. Emerging zoonotic diseases further link ecosystem health to water systems.

Pollutants raise emerging concerns: Microplastics, pharmaceuticals, and antimicrobial resistance pose growing threats to freshwater and human health.

Digital divides: While technologies for water monitoring are advancing, developing countries face capacity gaps in adoption and use.

Opportunity: Investing in water-health systems, pollution control, and digital literacy enhances resilience and supports multiple SDGs. These strengthen the interlinkages Between SDG 6 and Other SDGs such as:SDG 2 (Zero Hunger): Sustainable water management is vital for food security and climate-resilient agriculture.

SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy): Water is central for hydropower, cooling systems, and renewable energy solutions.

SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities): Urban water resilience underpins sustainable cities and communities.

SDG 13 (Climate Action): Water is the primary medium for adaptation and resilience to climate change.

SDG 14 (Life Below Water): Reducing land-based pollution protects oceans and coastal ecosystems.

SDG 15 (Life on Land): Integrated land and water management prevents desertification and restores ecosystems.

SDG 16 and 17: Transboundary cooperation and global partnerships are essential for water peace and shared resilience.

IV. **Solutions** (2000 words):

4. Solutions

While the scale of water-related challenges is unprecedented, so too is the potential for transformative action. Solutions exist that can safeguard water resources, protect ecosystems, reduce disaster risks, and promote sustainable development. The “Water for Planet” dialogue must prioritize practical, inclusive, and scalable solutions that integrate climate, biodiversity, land, and disaster agendas. The following pathways should be looked at as priorities:

4.1 Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)

IWRM provides a comprehensive framework for balancing competing water demands across agriculture, energy, urban development, and ecosystems. Despite progress since 2023, implementation remains uneven. Scaling up IWRM—particularly in transboundary basins—is critical for resilience. Embedding IWRM in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and National Biodiversity Strategies (NBSAPs) ensures coherence across agendas.

4.2 Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) and Hybrid Infrastructure

Restoring wetlands, rehabilitating watersheds, and protecting forests enhance resilience to droughts and floods, improve water quality, and support biodiversity. Hybrid approaches that combine NbS with grey infrastructure provide cost-effective and flexible solutions. For example, restored floodplains combined with levees can manage flood risk more effectively than hard infrastructure alone.

Synergies: NbS advance SDG 6.6 (ecosystems), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (ocean protection), and SDG 15 (life on land).

4.3 Early Warning Systems and Risk Preparedness

Universal access to multi-hazard early warning systems by 2027, as called for by the UN Secretary-General, is achievable with political will and adequate investment. Advances in satellite technology, digital platforms, and AI-driven predictive models provide opportunities for anticipatory action.

Synergies: Supports SDG 11 (resilient cities), SDG 13 (climate resilience), and SDG 1 (poverty reduction).

4.4 Water–Food–Energy–Ecosystem Nexus Approaches

Agriculture accounts for 70% of freshwater withdrawals globally. With population growth and changing diets, demand will rise further. Efficient irrigation systems, drought-resistant crops, and circular food systems can reduce pressure on water. At the same time, water-smart energy solutions—such as renewable energy with low water footprints—can reduce demand from the energy sector.

4.5 Sustainable Groundwater Management

Groundwater sustains billions of people, yet it is being depleted and polluted at alarming rates. Sustainable management requires monitoring, regulation of abstraction, protection from contamination, and investments in managed aquifer recharge. Regional frameworks are needed to govern transboundary aquifers.

Synergies: Advances SDG 6.4 (water efficiency) and SDG 15 (land restoration).

4.6 Pollution Control and Wastewater Management

Controlling water pollution is essential for health, ecosystems, and socio-economic development. Solutions include upgrading wastewater treatment, reducing agricultural runoff, and promoting safe reuse of treated wastewater. Circular water use can turn wastewater into a resource for agriculture and industry.

Synergies: Aligns with SDG 6.3 (water quality) and SDG 14.1 (reduce ocean pollution).

4.7 Digital Transformation and Innovation

Emerging technologies—remote sensing, big data, artificial intelligence, blockchain—can revolutionize water management. Applications include basin-scale digital twins, real-time water quality monitoring, and precision agriculture. However, equitable access to technology is critical to avoid widening divides.

4.8 Financing Mechanisms and Valuation of Water

Closing the water financing gap requires innovative instruments. Green and blue bonds and blended finance can attract investment. Valuing ecosystem services provides the evidence base for directing finance to NbS and resilience-building.

Synergies: Advances SDG 17 (partnerships for implementation) and ensures water-related goals receive a fair share of climate finance.

4.9 Cross-Sectoral and Intergovernmental Coordination

Effective solutions require breaking down policy silos. Strengthening cooperation between UN WATER, UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD, and Sendai processes ensures coherence. At national level, inter-ministerial platforms can promote integrated planning.

4.10 Capacity Building, Education, and Inclusion

Solutions must empower people. Building local capacity—particularly among women, youth, and indigenous communities—ensures ownership and sustainability. Education, training, and knowledge exchange are vital for changing behaviors and building resilience.

Synergies: Advances SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

4.11 Water Diplomacy and Peacebuilding

Water cooperation can foster peace and stability. Negotiated agreements, joint monitoring, and benefit-sharing approaches reduce risks of conflict.

Synergies: Supports SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

4.12 Leveraging Global and Regional Initiatives

The “Water for Planet” dialogue should build on existing initiatives such as AWARe, the UN Early Warning for All initiative, and the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. Mapping and aligning initiatives ensure synergies and avoid duplication.

V. Recommendations and conclusions (2000 words)

Building on the solutions identified, the following are a set of policy recommendations to guide governments, international organizations, financial institutions, and civil society toward transformative water action. These recommendations are grounded in the principles of inclusivity, cooperation, and sustainability, and they reflect the interlinkages between water, climate, biodiversity, desertification, and disaster resilience.

5.1 Mainstream Water Across Global Agendas

- **Integrate water into climate action:** Ensure water is systematically embedded in NDCs, NAPs, and Global Stock take processes under the Paris Agreement.
- **Link biodiversity and water:** Incorporate freshwater ecosystem protection and restoration as key contributions to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- **Connect with combatting desertification agendas:** Prioritize sustainable land and water management in UNCCD National Action Plans to achieve land degradation neutrality.
- **Disaster risk reduction:** Align water management strategies with the Sendai Framework, emphasizing resilience-building.

5.2 Strengthen Global Water Governance

- Establish a **UN Water Platform** for policy dialogue, monitoring, and follow-up on commitments, ensuring coherence across UN processes.
- Promote an “**Inter-COP**” **mechanism** to connect climate, biodiversity, desertification, and water discussions.
- Regularize **Special Thematic Sessions on Water and Disasters** within UN frameworks.

5.3 Scale Up Finance for Water

- **Increase allocations:** Raise water-related adaptation finance beyond the current 3% of climate finance flows.
- **Innovative instruments:** Promote blended finance and green/blue bonds.
- **Loss and damage:** Operationalize mechanisms to assess and finance water-related loss and damage, ensuring vulnerable countries are supported.
- **Leverage co-benefits:** Clearly articulate water's role in food, socio-economic development, biodiversity, and climate outcomes to unlock multi-sectoral financing.

5.4 Advance Data, Knowledge, and Innovation

- Develop a **Global Water Information System** to support decision-making, early warning, and monitoring.
- Promote **open science and data-sharing** across countries and regions.
- Support research on **emerging pollutants, digital water tools, and climate–water interactions**.
- Empower local institutions with data literacy and capacity to use new technologies.

5.5 Prioritize Nature-Based and Hybrid Infrastructure

- Scale up investments in wetland restoration, watershed management, and reforestation.
- Promote hybrid infrastructure combining NbS with grey systems to maximize resilience.
- Integrate NbS into national development plans, disaster preparedness, and urban planning.

Synergies: Supports SDG 6.6 (ecosystems), SDG 13 (climate), and SDG 15 (land).

5.6 Ensure Equity, Gender-Responsiveness, and Inclusion

- Adopt gender-responsive policies across all water-related strategies.
- Empower youth and indigenous peoples as active stakeholders in water governance.
- Ensure that water policies address the needs of marginalized communities in rural and urban contexts.
- Recognize water as a **human right**, reinforcing equity and justice.

5.7 Enhance Transboundary Cooperation

- Strengthen legal and institutional frameworks for inclusive transboundary water governance based on international water law and other relevant international instruments.
- Promote basin-wide planning, joint monitoring, and data sharing.
- Encourage cooperative adaptation strategies based on mutual benefits and no-harm principles.
- Establish financing facilities dedicated to transboundary water cooperation.

5.8 Promote Innovation and Digital Transformation

- Support adoption of digital water solutions, including smart irrigation, digital twins, and predictive modeling.
- Bridge digital divides through capacity-building and financing in developing countries.
- Foster partnerships with the private sector and academia to scale innovation.

Synergies: Supports SDG 9 (innovation) and SDG 17 (partnerships).

5.9 Foster Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and Coalitions

- Strengthen collaboration among governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector.
- Align with existing initiatives such as AWARe, Early Warning for All, and the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.
- Promote cross-sectoral coalitions (e.g., water–climate, water–food, water–energy) for integrated action.

5.10 Build Resilient Infrastructure for the Future

- Invest in agreed upon water-wise infrastructure that is resilient to climate extremes.
- Prioritize upgrading existing infrastructure using digital tools to enhance efficiency.
- Align infrastructure investments with green and blue transitions to maximize co-benefits.

Synergies: Links SDG 6 (water), SDG 9 (infrastructure), and SDG 11 (sustainable cities).

VI. Guiding questions (1000 words)

The 2026 Interactive Dialogue on *Water for Planet* must serve not only as a platform for sharing experiences but also as a catalyst for commitments, partnerships, and transformative action. To this end, the following guiding questions, structured across key thematic areas, could be useful:

6.1 Climate and Water

- How can water be fully integrated into national climate strategies, particularly NDCs and NAPs, to deliver co-benefits for adaptation and mitigation?
- What mechanisms are needed to operationalize water-related “loss and damage” under the Paris Agreement, and how can financing be mobilized for the most vulnerable countries?
- How can universal early warning systems be made accessible to all countries, particularly LDCs and SIDS, by 2027?

- What role can agreed-upon water-wise infrastructure play in accelerating the clean energy transition while ensuring climate resilience?

6.2 Biodiversity and Ecosystems

- How can freshwater ecosystem restoration contribute to achieving the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework targets?
- What policy and financial incentives are most effective in scaling nature-based solutions for water, biodiversity, and climate?
- How can “source-to-sea” approaches be operationalized to reduce pollution and sustain ecosystem services across freshwater, coastal, and marine systems?
- How can we better link ecosystem restoration with community livelihoods and poverty reduction to ensure social buy-in and sustainability?

6.3 Desertification and Land Degradation

- What integrated land and water management practices are most effective in halting desertification and supporting land degradation neutrality?
- How can sustainable soil and water management enhance food security and climate resilience in arid and semi-arid regions?
- What lessons from Africa and the global south can inform global action on land–water linkages?
- How can investments in land and water systems be structured to deliver multiple benefits for agriculture, biodiversity, and climate?

6.4 Water Quality and Pollution

- What innovative policies and technologies can accelerate progress on SDG 6.3 (water quality) by reducing industrial effluents, agricultural runoff, and untreated wastewater?
- How can countries build circular water economies where wastewater is safely reused in agriculture, industry, and urban systems?
- What governance frameworks are needed to address emerging pollutants such as microplastics, pharmaceuticals, and antimicrobial resistance?
- How can action on water quality contribute to achieving SDG 14.1 (reduce marine pollution)?

6.5 Resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction

- How can water-centered strategies enhance resilience against both slow-onset (drought, aridification) and rapid-onset (floods, storms) disasters?
- How can disaster risk reduction frameworks be better integrated with climate and biodiversity agendas?
- What role can green and hybrid infrastructure play in reducing disaster risks and sustaining ecosystem services?
- How can inclusive approaches ensure that women, youth, and marginalized groups are not only protected but also empowered in resilience strategies?

6.6 Governance and Cooperation

- What institutional innovations are needed to break down silos and ensure integrated water governance across climate, biodiversity, and land sectors?
- How can transboundary cooperation be strengthened to manage shared rivers, lakes, and aquifers equitably and sustainably?
- What role can water diplomacy play in preventing conflict and promoting regional peace and stability?
- How can the UN system be enhanced to provide a more coherent global governance platform for water, based on international law, including a potential UN Water compliance mechanism?

6.7 Financing and Partnerships

- How can water's role in climate adaptation, biodiversity, and land management be more clearly articulated to mobilize finance across sectors?
- What innovative financing mechanisms—such as green and blue bonds, and blended finance, —can scale water investments?
- How can international financial institutions, development banks, and the private sector align financial flows with water sustainability and resilience?
- How can multi-stakeholder partnerships—bringing together governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector—be scaled to implement transformative water solutions?

6.8 Equity, Inclusion, and Human Rights

- How can the human right to safe water and sanitation be better operationalized in national and international water policies?
- What strategies can ensure that women, youth, and indigenous peoples have meaningful roles in water governance and decision-making?
- How can water action contribute to reducing inequalities and achieving the “leave no one behind” principle of the 2030 Agenda?
- What role can education and capacity building play in fostering water stewardship and long-term sustainability?

Concept Note: Interactive Dialogue on “Water in Multilateral Processes: SDG 6, the 2030 Agenda, and Global Water Initiatives”

I. Introduction (approx. 500 words)

Water is a fundamental enabler of sustainable development, climate resilience, peace, and prosperity. It underpins food security, energy production, human health, and ecosystem integrity. Yet, despite its centrality, water remains insufficiently prioritized in global policymaking and multilateral processes. Recognizing this, the international community adopted Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6), committing to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” by 2030. Achieving this goal is vital not only for water security but also for the success of the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The 2023 UN Water Conference was a landmark moment in reaffirming political attention to water. It mobilized over 700 voluntary commitments under the Water Action Agenda, highlighted the role of the newly appointed UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Water, and underscored the interlinkages between water, climate resilience, biodiversity, and disaster risk reduction. At the same time, the Conference revealed persistent challenges of fragmented governance, insufficient financing, and weak accountability. The upcoming 2026 UN Water Conference therefore provides a critical opportunity to accelerate implementation of SDG 6, strengthen multilateral processes, and embed water as a cross-cutting priority across the United Nations system.

Against this backdrop, the **Interactive Dialogue on “Water in Multilateral Processes”** is both timely and necessary. It will provide a platform for Member States, UN entities, civil society, and stakeholders to:

- Review progress since the 2023 Conference;
- Identify persistent gaps in governance, coordination, and financing;
- Explore innovative and actionable solutions that can be scaled and adapted globally;
- Ensure that water is fully recognized as a cross-cutting priority in the post-2030 development agenda.

II. Status and Trends (approx. 1000 words)

Water is increasingly recognized as indispensable to sustainable development, peace, and prosperity, yet its role within multilateral processes remains underdeveloped. The adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) in 2015 was a historic step, embedding water into the heart of the 2030 Agenda. However, nearly a decade later, the world is off track. The challenge is not only one of technical delivery, but also of global governance and multilateral coordination.

According to the **United Nations 2023 SDG Progress Report**, only one in four countries is on course to achieve national drinking water targets by 2030. Approximately **2.2 billion people** lack safely managed drinking water, while **3.5 billion people** remain without safely managed sanitation services. Nearly **half the world's population** faces water scarcity for at least one month per year, and global demand is projected to exceed supply by **40 percent by 2030**. These gaps are well documented. What is less systematically addressed is the absence of coherent multilateral frameworks to support countries in bridging them.

The **2023 UN Water Conference** was a milestone in raising global attention. It generated over **700 voluntary initiatives** under the Water Action Agenda, spanning financing, technology, and local action. It also contributed momentum toward designating a Special Envoy on Water, elevating the profile of high-level advocacy and coordination. Yet these advances remain voluntary and fragmented, without a binding or system-wide framework for follow-up. Member States and UN entities highlighted water's linkages to climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, and resilience, but there is still no clear multilateral process to integrate water systematically into these global agendas.

This institutional fragmentation is a defining challenge. More than **30 UN entities** have water-related responsibilities, but no single body has an overarching mandate. UN-Water plays a valuable role as a coordination mechanism, but it lacks the authority and resources to drive system-wide alignment. The Special Envoy represents an important innovation, yet the position is not fully empowered. As a result, water governance at the global level remains dispersed, duplicative, and weakly accountable. For Member States, this fragmentation translates into inefficiencies and missed opportunities for collective action.

Progress since 2023 shows both momentum and limits. On the positive side, water has gained visibility in climate and biodiversity forums such as COP27, COP28, and multilateral negotiations on ecosystems and desertification, where water is

increasingly recognized as a critical enabler of resilience. Yet recognition is uneven. Too often, water continues to be treated as a sectoral issue rather than as a **cross-cutting foundation for achieving the SDGs**. Without clearer integration into multilateral processes, progress will remain partial and inconsistent.

The consequences of inaction are systemic. **Water insecurity multiplies risks**, undermining development and stability across the 2030 Agenda. When water is scarce or poorly managed, it constrains food security by reducing irrigation reliability and agricultural productivity, thereby exacerbating nutrition challenges. It also limits energy production by restricting reliable access to water for power generation and industrial processes, constraining economic growth and slowing the transition to more sustainable energy systems. At the same time, insufficient progress on water and sanitation worsens health outcomes, with waterborne diseases remaining a major cause of illness and mortality while inadequate services place additional strain on already fragile health systems. Poverty reduction and gender equality are likewise hindered, as women and marginalized groups bear a disproportionate burden from inadequate access, spending long hours securing water and coping with poor sanitation, which limits education and livelihoods. Beyond these dimensions, water insecurity heightens risks of instability and conflict, particularly in fragile contexts and shared basins where competition over limited water resources exacerbates tensions and displacement. **These risks are magnified by the absence of coherent multilateral mechanisms to manage shared resources, mobilize finance, and ensure accountability.**

Emerging trends since 2023 underline the urgency of a stronger multilateral response. Climate change is increasing the frequency of water-related disasters, yet global coordination on adaptation and resilience financing remains fragmented. Rapid urbanization is creating enormous demands for water and sanitation, but there is no global mechanism to guide urban water resilience. Pollution continues to undermine water quality, yet monitoring frameworks are fragmented across agencies and regions. Technological innovation offers opportunities, but access is uneven, with no coordinated platform to ensure equitable distribution of solutions. These challenges are global in nature and require global cooperation.

Financing is a particularly stark example. The annual investment gap for SDG 6 exceeds **\$300 billion**, far outpacing current flows. While the Water Action Agenda mobilized commitments, most remain voluntary, untracked, and without enforcement. Developing and climate-vulnerable countries face particular obstacles in accessing concessional finance, while global water financing remains dispersed across multiple institutions and instruments. Without a coordinated multilateral

financing mechanism—anchored in transparency, predictability, and accountability—the gap will persist.

Yet there are also positive signals. Regional platforms, inclusive river basin organizations, and global dialogues are demonstrating that cooperation is possible. Joint monitoring systems, collective planning mechanisms, and multilateral initiatives on resilience and adaptation are increasingly recognized as good practices. International forums have begun to elevate water politically and encourage knowledge-sharing across regions. These experiences show that multilateral engagement can drive coherence and momentum when adequately supported and resourced.

Taken together, the status and trends reveal a sobering but clear picture. The world is not on track to achieve SDG 6, and without stronger multilateral frameworks, the risks will deepen. Inequalities will widen, disaster vulnerabilities will increase, and conflicts over resources may intensify. But the recognition of water's cross-cutting role in sustainable development is also growing, creating a foundation for progress. The challenge now is to move from fragmented, voluntary, and largely national approaches to **coherent, accountable, and adequately financed multilateral processes that place water at the core of global development, climate action, and resilience-building.**

III. Challenges and Emerging Issues (approx. 2000 words)

1. Fragmentation and Coordination

Global water governance remains fragmented, with responsibilities spread across more than 30 UN entities, regional bodies, development banks, and specialized agencies. While this specialization brings technical expertise, it often leads to duplication, inefficiencies, and gaps in coordination. Many water-related projects and programmes are developed without adequate integration across sectors—for example, between infrastructure planning, climate adaptation, and ecosystem protection—reducing their effectiveness. This fragmentation also complicates alignment with wider multilateral development and climate agendas. Platforms such as UN-Water provide useful opportunities for dialogue, but their limited mandate and resources restrict their impact. Stronger coordination across UN agencies, and more structured collaboration with Member States, are essential to achieving coherent global water governance.

2. Limited Institutional Empowerment

The designation of a Special Envoy on Water represents an important step in raising water's visibility on the global agenda. However, the current mandate lacks sufficient authority, resources, and convening power. This limits the ability of the Envoy to coordinate across UN entities, mobilize global action, and facilitate cross-sectoral dialogue. Strengthening this role with a clearer mandate, adequate resources, and regular reporting responsibilities to intergovernmental bodies would allow more effective monitoring, accountability, and multilateral engagement on water.

3. Absence of a Binding Global Framework

Despite water's centrality to development and stability, no comprehensive, binding global framework exists. Existing legal instruments, such as the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention and the 1992 water Convention, provide important guidance on transboundary water management but remain limited in ratification and enforcement. Many shared water resources lack inclusive and structured agreements, leaving states vulnerable to disputes. This legal gap undermines long-term planning, cooperation, and conflict prevention.

Strengthening compliance with international law is essential to ensure predictability and accountability in managing shared water resources. Enforcing agreed commitments helps secure mutual benefits while preventing harm, thereby promoting trust, stability, and cooperation. A stronger global framework could provide consistency, joint monitoring, and dispute resolution mechanisms, supporting both sustainable development and peace.

4. Financing Gaps

Meeting SDG 6 requires investments far beyond current levels. The global financing gap is estimated at more than **\$300 billion annually**, covering drinking water, sanitation, wastewater treatment, and integrated water resources management. Current financing depends heavily on bilateral aid, voluntary commitments, and project-based initiatives, which limit predictability and accountability.

Developing countries, especially those facing water stress and climate vulnerability, encounter major challenges in accessing concessional finance. Innovative tools such as blended finance, water bonds, and multi-donor funds are emerging, but remain small in scale. Without more coherent and coordinated multilateral financing

mechanisms—anchored in transparency, accountability, and equity—progress will continue to fall short.

5. Climate and Environmental Pressures

Climate change is intensifying pressures on water systems, increasing scarcity, floods, and variability in rainfall. More frequent disasters damage infrastructure, disrupt food and energy systems, and displace communities. Rapid urban growth creates additional demand for safe water and sanitation, often outpacing planning and investment.

Water quality is also declining due to pollution from agriculture, industry, and untreated wastewater. Unsustainable abstraction further depletes freshwater resources, threatening ecosystems and livelihoods. These pressures are global in nature but responses remain fragmented. Coordinated adaptation strategies, ecosystem-based approaches, and climate-resilient infrastructure must be strengthened within international cooperation frameworks to ensure long-term water security.

6. Data, Technology, and Capacity Deficits

Reliable data, technology, and institutional capacity are critical for effective water management, yet major gaps persist. Many countries lack comprehensive monitoring systems for hydrology and water quality, and access to tools such as remote sensing, predictive analytics, and early warning systems remains uneven. Even when technologies exist, institutional and technical capacities to apply them effectively are often limited.

Knowledge-sharing and capacity-building initiatives are in place but remain scattered and under-resourced. Stronger multilateral platforms for data exchange, technology transfer, and capacity development are needed to ensure all countries—particularly the most vulnerable—can make informed decisions and adapt to growing water challenges.

7. Interlinkages Across the SDGs

Water underpins nearly every dimension of sustainable development. Delays in achieving SDG 6 hinder progress on food security, health outcomes, poverty reduction, gender equality, energy transitions, and peacebuilding. Conversely, accelerating progress on water delivers wide co-benefits across the 2030 Agenda.

Despite this, multilateral frameworks still often treat water as a sectoral issue, limiting opportunities for integration. Addressing interlinkages more systematically in multilateral negotiations on climate, biodiversity, and sustainable development is essential to position water as a cross-cutting foundation for global progress.

8. Regional and Transboundary Complexity

More than 60 percent of global freshwater flows cross national boundaries, creating both opportunities for cooperation and risks of conflict. Many transboundary resources still lack inclusive and comprehensive management frameworks, and persistent gaps remain in data-sharing, institutional capacity, and dispute resolution. These gaps increase vulnerability to tension, especially in regions already under pressure from climate change and demographic growth.

Strengthening regional arrangements, joint monitoring, and multistakeholder platforms is therefore essential. Multilateral processes can play a critical role in building trust, supporting technical cooperation, and promoting harmonized approaches that turn transboundary waters into drivers of cooperation and resilience.

9. Emerging Trends and the Multilateral Dimension

Emerging global trends demand stronger multilateral responses. Rapid urbanization and population growth are straining water and sanitation systems, requiring shared standards, exchange of lessons, and joint financing of resilient infrastructure. Technological innovation, from satellite monitoring to AI-based forecasting, offers opportunities to improve efficiency, but equitable access depends on multilateral platforms for technology transfer and data-sharing standards.

Climate variability and extreme events such as floods and droughts highlight the need for regional response frameworks, joint planning, and strengthened disaster risk reduction. Recognizing these dynamics within multilateral processes is essential to reduce disparities, strengthen resilience, and ensure that all countries benefit from collective progress.

These challenges show that barriers to achieving SDG 6 are not only technical or financial, but systemic and multilateral in nature. Fragmented governance, limited mandates, voluntary commitments, and uneven access to finance and technology cannot be solved by national action alone. Stronger global coordination, clearer accountability, and a more effective interface between Member States and UN institutions are required. Addressing water as a cross-cutting enabler of sustainable development means moving beyond fragmented initiatives toward coherent

multilateral frameworks that deliver equity, predictability, and shared responsibility—laying the foundation for solutions that are global in scope and lasting in impact.

IV. Solutions (approx. 2,000 words)

1. Strengthening Multilateral Coordination

Effective management of global water resources requires coordinated action across the United Nations system, regional bodies, and Member States. Overcoming fragmentation is critical to improve efficiency, reduce duplication, and maximize impact. UN-Water, with an enhanced mandate and resources, could serve as a central platform to monitor global progress on SDG 6, report systematically to intergovernmental bodies, and facilitate policy harmonization among UN agencies. It could also support joint initiatives linking water with climate adaptation, biodiversity, energy, and sustainable development.

Regional and transboundary coordination mechanisms also need reinforcement. Organizations such as regional development banks, basin authorities, and multilateral forums can enable integrated resource management, harmonize policy approaches, and share best practices. By fostering structured multilateral engagement, Member States can collectively address shared challenges, improve resource management, and strengthen water security at local, national, and regional levels.

2. Empowering the UN Special Envoy on Water

The Special Envoy on Water represents a pivotal mechanism to unify global water action, but its effectiveness depends on stronger institutional support. Expanding the mandate of the Envoy would enable the convening of high-level forums that connect water with climate, food security, energy, and ecosystems. The Envoy could also facilitate dialogue in transboundary contexts, coordinate joint programs across UN agencies and regional bodies, and report regularly to the General Assembly and ECOSOC on progress and gaps.

Providing predictable technical, financial, and administrative resources is essential for the Envoy to deliver on these functions. Strengthening this role would elevate water within multilateral processes, ensure coherence across initiatives, and enhance accountability for advancing SDG 6.

3. Global Financing Solutions

Bridging the annual SDG 6 financing gap, estimated at more than **\$300 billion**, requires predictable, innovative, and coordinated mechanisms. Blended finance models can leverage public, private, and philanthropic resources, while instruments such as water bonds can attract long-term investment in infrastructure and resilience. Multi-donor funds can pool resources for regional and agreed upon transboundary projects, increasing impact and reducing duplication.

To ensure that commitments translate into measurable outcomes, stronger monitoring and reporting systems are required, with greater transparency and accountability. Special attention should be given to developing countries, small island states, and climate-vulnerable regions. Tailored financial support, technical assistance, and capacity-building will be critical to ensure equitable access to multilateral water financing.

4. Technological Innovation and Capacity-Building

Technology and human capacity are central to effective water management. Expanding access to tools such as satellite monitoring, AI-based forecasting, and smart irrigation can increase efficiency and resilience. Digital platforms that enable early warning systems and predictive planning should be scaled and integrated into multilateral programs.

At the same time, capacity-building for national institutions, technical personnel, and local communities is essential. Multilateral cooperation can facilitate technology transfer, provide training, and promote knowledge-sharing across regions. Embedding innovation and capacity-building in global cooperation frameworks will help ensure that benefits are equitably distributed, particularly for low-income and vulnerable countries.

5. Governance and Legal Frameworks

Strengthening governance and legal frameworks is central to advancing sustainable and cooperative water management. While existing international instruments provide valuable foundations, limited ratification and weak enforcement continue to undermine their effectiveness. It is therefore essential that multilateral efforts reaffirm the primacy of international law as the cornerstone of global water governance. Transboundary cooperation must be firmly rooted in its principles and rules fostering mutual trust among riparian states and preventing harm across borders.

Effective enforcement of these norms is not only a technical matter but a political imperative. It provides predictability, fairness, and accountability, enabling water to serve as a catalyst for peace, stability, and sustainable development rather than as a source of tension. Regional agreements that operationalize these principles, coupled with multilateral platforms that facilitate dialogue and strengthen dispute-resolution mechanisms, are key to translating commitments into action. Embedding adherence to international law within global water governance will reinforce collective responsibility, enhance solidarity, and unlock the full potential of water as a driver of cooperation and shared prosperity.

6. Forward-Looking Strategies Beyond 2030

Sustainable water management requires long-term strategies that extend well beyond the 2030 horizon. Water must be fully integrated with climate adaptation, energy security, food systems, and ecosystem preservation, ensuring that responses maximize co-benefits and avoid fragmented or short-term solutions.

These forward-looking approaches cannot be pursued by countries acting alone. Multilateral frameworks are indispensable for mobilizing resources, developing shared foresight, and coordinating scenario planning and risk assessments. Embedding water into global foresight exercises and international cooperation platforms will help anticipate risks collectively, harmonize responses across regions, and ensure that no country or community is left behind.

Beyond 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals should be seen as a milestone rather than an endpoint. The international community will inevitably shape a new global development framework, and water must be placed at its core. Anchoring water security within this post-2030 architecture is vital to ensure it is recognized not simply as a sectoral concern, but as a foundation for peace, resilience, equity, and prosperity. Sustained international cooperation, rooted in solidarity and shared responsibility, will be essential to guarantee that water remains a unifying global priority in shaping the future multilateral agenda.

7. Partnerships and Collaborative Approaches

Addressing global water challenges requires collaboration across governments, civil society, the private sector, and research institutions. Joint programs that combine technical, financial, and governance expertise across agencies and countries can amplify impact and enable scaling of successful models. Knowledge-sharing networks and technical platforms can disseminate lessons and innovations, while engaging local stakeholders ensures ownership and relevance.

Multilateral financing platforms that pool resources and share risks for large-scale initiatives can further strengthen collaboration. Embedding such approaches in global processes will foster collective responsibility and accelerate progress toward water security.

8. Integration of Technology, Governance, and Finance

Water solutions are most effective when technology, governance, and finance are aligned. Multilateral processes can facilitate this integration by directing financing to high-impact areas, ensuring governance reforms support efficiency and transparency, and promoting equitable application of technologies. Data-driven decision-making and evidence-based policy should be mainstreamed across regions and sectors.

By aligning these elements through multilateral frameworks, global water management becomes more coherent, adaptive, and capable of driving progress across the 2030 Agenda.

The solutions outlined above demonstrate that achieving SDG 6 and ensuring water security will not be possible through fragmented or voluntary initiatives alone. Coherent multilateral action is required—linking governance, finance, technology, and capacity-building in ways that deliver accountability and equity. Recent global and regional processes have laid important foundations of political momentum and cooperation that can be built upon to advance this agenda. By strengthening coordination across the UN system, empowering leadership roles within multilateral frameworks, closing financing gaps, and embedding forward-looking governance, the international community can place water firmly at the heart of global sustainable development. These steps will help secure progress on the 2030 Agenda while ensuring that water remains a central pillar of the multilateral architecture that will guide the world beyond 2030.

V. Recommendations and Conclusion (approx. 2,000 words)

A. Overarching Recommendations

The analysis of progress, challenges, and solutions highlights that water must be elevated as a political and multilateral priority. Achieving SDG 6 and embedding water in future global frameworks requires moving from fragmented, voluntary approaches to coherent, accountable, and adequately resourced multilateral processes. The following overarching recommendations are proposed for the Interactive Dialogue.

1. Reaffirm Water as a Cross-Cutting Multilateral Priority

- Member States should explicitly recognize water as a foundation for peace, security, climate action, and sustainable development in all global forums, including the General Assembly, ECOSOC, and processes related to climate, biodiversity, desertification, and financing for development.
- Water should no longer be treated as a narrow sectoral issue. Instead, it must be addressed as a unifying enabler of the 2030 Agenda and the post-2030 global development framework.

2. Strengthen Multilateral Governance and Coordination

- UN-Water should be granted an enhanced mandate and resources to coordinate system-wide water action, facilitate alignment across agencies, and report systematically to intergovernmental bodies.
- The Special Envoy on Water should be empowered with clear convening authority, adequate resources, and regular reporting responsibilities.
- Regional and transboundary cooperation frameworks should be reinforced, with agreements and mechanisms rooted in internationally recognized principles to ensure sustainable use, prevent harm, and build trust among riparian states.
- Multilateral platforms must also ensure structured engagement of Member States, regional bodies, civil society, and knowledge institutions, strengthening inclusivity and shared responsibility.

3. Establish Predictable and Equitable Financing Mechanisms

- A global financing framework for water should be considered, pooling resources from multilateral, bilateral, and private actors, while ensuring equitable access for developing countries and climate-vulnerable regions.
- Financial commitments under the Water Action Agenda should be tracked and reported through transparent mechanisms that ensure accountability.
- Innovative tools such as blended finance, water bonds, and pooled multi-donor funds should be expanded under multilateral coordination to reduce fragmentation and enhance impact.

4. Harness Technology, Data, and Capacity-Building through Multilateral Platforms

- Multilateral institutions should facilitate technology transfer, ensuring equitable access to digital monitoring tools, forecasting systems, and smart water solutions.
- Knowledge-sharing platforms must be expanded to build technical and institutional capacities in countries that face persistent gaps.
- Capacity-building should be embedded into global cooperation frameworks, ensuring that no country is left behind in accessing innovation and knowledge.

5. Embed Water in the Post-2030 Global Development Framework

- The SDGs must be recognized as a milestone, not an endpoint. Member States should begin shaping the successor global agenda with water as a central pillar.
- Global foresight processes—scenario planning, risk assessments, and horizon scanning—should integrate water as a priority dimension of peace, equity, and resilience.
- Anchoring water security in the post-2030 development architecture will ensure it is treated not simply as a sectoral concern but as a universal foundation for prosperity and stability.

B. Specific Recommendations

For Member States:

- Elevate water as a priority in negotiations across climate, biodiversity, desertification, financing for development, and peace and security processes.
- Champion the integration of water outcomes in the 2026 and 2028 UN Water Conferences.
- Provide political and financial support for strengthening UN-Water and the Special Envoy on Water.
- Support regional cooperation frameworks grounded in internationally recognized norms that ensure equitable and sustainable management of shared resources.

For the United Nations System:

- Mainstream water across all UN processes, ensuring that interlinkages with climate, food, energy, health, and peace are explicitly reflected in strategies and reporting.
- Strengthen UN-Water's authority and resources to act as a central hub for system-wide water action.

- Provide the Special Envoy on Water with clear convening power, reporting responsibilities, and operational resources.
- Develop a transparent accountability mechanism for tracking delivery of the Water Action Agenda and related commitments.

For International Financial Institutions and Development Partners:

- Increase concessional financing for water and sanitation, prioritizing climate-vulnerable and water-scarce countries.
- Align financing with multilateral goals, avoiding duplication and fragmentation.
- Scale up blended finance, guarantees, and innovative tools such as water bonds within a predictable global framework.
- Support capacity-building and technology transfer to ensure that financing translates into sustainable and equitable impact.

For Regional Bodies and Basin Organizations:

- Reinforce regional water cooperation mechanisms, ensuring they are grounded in internationally recognized principles of equity, mutual benefit, and the obligation to avoid harm, in line with international law, thereby fostering trust, stability, and sustainable management of shared resources.
- Expand joint monitoring and data-sharing systems to strengthen trust and evidence-based decision-making.
- Enhance dispute-prevention and resolution platforms to reduce the risk of tension over shared resources.
- Mobilize regional development banks and organizations to invest in water security as a pillar of resilience and adaptation.

For Civil Society, Academia, and the Private Sector:

- Advocate for water as a human right and a foundation for sustainable development.
- Monitor and hold actors accountable for the delivery of commitments made under global processes.
- Contribute research, innovation, and best practices through multilateral platforms.
- Engage in partnerships that align private investment with public priorities, ensuring solutions are equitable and sustainable.

C. Conclusion

The urgent reality is that the world is not on track to achieve SDG 6, and water insecurity is multiplying risks across the global agenda. Fragmented governance, weak accountability, and insufficient financing undermine progress. At the same time, opportunities exist to transform the way water is prioritized within multilateral processes.

The 2026 UN Water Conference must mark a turning point. It must move the international community beyond fragmented and voluntary commitments toward structured, accountable, and adequately resourced multilateral cooperation. The Interactive Dialogue on “Water in Multilateral Processes” is an essential step in laying the groundwork for this transformation.

The Dialogue can advance three critical outcomes:

- First, it can reaffirm water as a political and cross-cutting priority, linking it explicitly to peace, climate action, and sustainable development.
- Second, it can strengthen governance and financing by calling for empowered institutions, predictable resources, and frameworks rooted in cooperation and trust.
- Third, it can ensure water is positioned at the core of the post-2030 global development framework, making it a unifying element of the future multilateral agenda.

The SDGs should be recognized as a milestone rather than a conclusion. The architecture of global cooperation that succeeds them must be more ambitious, more integrated, and more accountable. Water must be placed at its core—not only because of its intrinsic importance, but because progress on every other dimension of sustainable development depends on it.

The international community faces a choice: to continue with fragmented and insufficient action, or to commit to coherent, accountable, and forward-looking multilateral frameworks that treat water as a driver of cooperation, peace, and prosperity. The outcome of this choice will determine not only the achievement of SDG 6 but also the credibility and effectiveness of the multilateral system itself.

**Egypt's Submission to the 2026 UN Water Conference,
Interactive Dialogue 4: Water for cooperation: transboundary and international water
cooperation, including scientific cooperation, and inclusive governance**

I. Introduction:

Water is fundamental for life and the fulfilment of all basic human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. It is the common thread that binds our nations and should be a means for cooperation and peace, not competition and conflict.

The critical importance of water cannot be overemphasized as it impacts a wide-range of human rights, including the right to life, water and sanitation, food, health, adequate standard of living, clean and healthy environment and decent livelihoods. In addition, water is inextricably linked to the three pillars of sustainable development, and without achieving SDG6, the world will not be able to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, effective cross-border cooperation on water is an important catalyst for the maintenance of peace and security.

Water is cross-cutting in nature, and, if properly managed, it will be a catalyst for cross border cooperation towards achieving SDG 6 and beyond, promoting climate resilience, protecting and fulfilling fundamental human rights, and maintaining regional and international peace and security. Globally, more than 286 rivers and 600 aquifers cross borders; and almost 90 percent of the world's population inhabits areas with transboundary water resources. Moreover, 60% of transboundary river basins and a much higher percentage of shared aquifers still lack any cooperative and adaptive transboundary management mechanisms, thus, political will is required to define and jump-start or accelerate transboundary actions supporting SDG6 and other water-related targets. Transboundary cooperation must be based on the applicable rules and principles of the international law.

The UN2023 Water Conference held in New York in March 2023 came at a critical juncture, 46 years since the convening of the last UN Conference on water. The issue of transboundary water cooperation featured prominently during the Conference, being the theme for the fourth interactive dialogue, and one of the key messages in the Summary of the President of the General Assembly. It also constitutes a considerable part of the Water Action Agenda.

Today, more than ever, transboundary cooperation needs to be further strengthened and enhanced. The international community's call to this effect is clear and resounding. The

UN 2026 Water Conference is an important milestone and an opportunity to continue this important discussion, promote tangible change and set a roadmap towards providing water security for all.

The Integrative dialogue “*Water for cooperation: transboundary and international water cooperation, including scientific cooperation, and inclusive governance*” should take into consideration the contributions of Member States and the preparatory meetings on the track to the 2026 Water Conference.

II. Overview of the challenge, current status and interlinkages:

2.5 billion people live in water-scarce regions. By 2050, more than half of the world’s population will be at risk due to water stress. Desertification will threaten the livelihoods of nearly one billion people in more than 100 countries. Intense water scarcity may displace 700 million people by 2030. Therefore, water scarce countries are the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of the absence or ineffectiveness of transboundary cooperation.

For instance, although its territory is slightly over 1 million square kilometers, Egypt is a desert oasis where the inhabited area is no more than 7% of the country. With a population of 104 million, Egypt is one of the most densely populated countries that suffers from acute water scarcity. The water share of Egyptians is currently 560 cubic meters/per capita/per year, and is projected to drop to below 500 cubic meters/per capita/per year by 2025. The water available for Egypt is already insufficient. Although Egypt releases 55.5 billion cubic meters annually from the High Aswan Dam, the reality is that Egypt’s water needs are over 80 billion cubic meters annually. This deficit is bridged by intensive water-recycling and reuse, which makes the water management system in Egypt incredibly efficient.

Egypt has a dependency ratio of 98% on the Nile, all of which originates in upstream Nile basin countries. This means that Egypt is particularly vulnerable to unplanned and unsustainable activities and projects across the Nile basin. In Egypt, a decrease of only 1 billion cubic meters of water would lead, in the agricultural sector alone, to 290,000 people losing their incomes, a loss of 130,000 hectares of cultivated land, an increase of \$150 million USD in food imports, and a loss of \$430 million USD of agricultural production. As water shortages increase and continue over an extended period, the ripple-effects on every sector of Egypt’s economy and its socio-political stability are inestimable.

Against the backdrop of water scarcity, there is recognition of the urgent need to achieve social, economic and human development, to alleviate poverty, and to collectively confront the common challenges of climate change and population growth. There is a misperception that the root challenge of transboundary cooperation is conflicting water uses, per se, especially in water scarce basins. In fact, challenges facing the quantity and quality of water resources are not simply the result of increased water consumption. Rather, the principal challenge facing the effective management of transboundary water

resources is the execution of economically inefficient and environmentally and hydrologically unsustainable projects that are undertaken without adequate consideration of their transboundary effects on the riparian ecosystem. This is often associated with unilateral policies based on a selective application of the applicable principles of international law, which eventually leads to deterioration in the overall welfare of the basin. In many instances, such projects are driven by political imperatives, and not hydrological or economic considerations. Therefore, it is essential that waterworks and other developmental projects, especially those that have transboundary effects, be undertaken in consultation and coordination with co-riparians to mitigate their adverse impacts.

Unilateral measures that risk causing significant adverse effects are not tolerated under international law. To guarantee international cooperation, States are required to respect their international obligations, including under customary international law and treaties in force. Similarly, the cardinal principles of customary international law on shared water resources cannot be implemented in isolation from each other. Conforming with these principles requires a comprehensive non-selective approach that ensures abidance by the principle of cooperation, consultation and prior notification, including conducting the requisite socio-economic and environmental impact assessment. This is a prerequisite to ensure abiding by the obligation not to cause significant harm, and to ensure the equitable and reasonable utilization of shared water resources. A water use that does not conform with such principles is inherently inequitable.

Developing legal regimes for the management of shared water resources is a challenge. Agreements on the management or utilization of shared water resources should be predicated on achieving a delicate balance between the rights, interests, and obligations of the riparian states, however, there is a misperception that the interests of upstream and downstream states are irreconcilable. That is a fallacy. Hydrological and environmental realities necessitate the recognition of the community of interest between riparian states sharing transboundary water resources. Accordingly, legal regimes and management systems that regulate the use of transboundary water resources should strive to achieve the optimal use of these resources in a manner that addresses the

respective rights and interests of all riparian States, whether upstream or downstream. Doing so requires taking into consideration the water security of all riparians, establishing robust mechanisms for coordination, prior notification, consultation on planned measures, adopting drainage basin approach, and providing effective means that protect riparian ecosystem and minimize any potential transboundary harm. More importantly, decision-making on the utilization of transboundary water resources should proceed on the basis of the principle of ‘*consensus*’. The purpose of decision-making by consensus is to make sure that the views of all States are equally taken into account. The absence of consensus adversely affects the legitimacy of transboundary cooperation and undermines its effectiveness.

Consequently, imposing non-inclusive frameworks that are adopted without consensus and that lack the necessary protections for the rights of all riparian states, especially downstream communities that are particularly vulnerable to the transboundary impacts of upstream projects, will undermine the prospects of cooperation and impair progress towards regional integration. On the other hand, inclusive frameworks addressing water security and abiding by the cardinal principle of prior notification would be consistent with well-established principles of customary international law, as reflected in numerous bilateral and multilateral conventions¹. Only such consensual and inclusive frameworks can provide a solid foundation for effective cooperation.

For instance, within the Nile basin, Egypt adheres to the consensually agreed principles based on the common aspiration “*One River, One people, One Vision*”. Therefore, Egypt is confident that it is possible to fulfil all the legitimate aspirations of the Nile riparian countries, if we work together in a spirit of cooperation and inclusivity, in accordance with customary international law, including the relevant outcomes of the UN Security Council, and best practices.

An additional challenge could be found in the actions of some stakeholders, including development agencies, financial institutions and the private sector, when they promote non-consensual activities in some basins, in violation of the human rights to water and the environmental obligations. In most cases, those activities could not be tolerated under the law in the stakeholder’s country of origin. It is imperative to encourage actions that foster cooperation rather than inciting divisions.

Indeed, the global water security challenge is escalating. Ensuring water security requires securing the vital human needs of water, including drinking water, water required for food production livelihoods, and water needed for sanitation and other domestic uses. Thus, a priority should be given to these vital human needs in implementing water related projects in transboundary water basin.

¹ According to the International Law Commission ILC and the relevant decisions of the International Court of Justice ICJ, customary International Law includes, but is not limited to, some provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997.

III. Overview of opportunities for progress and transformative solutions:

Preventive and anticipatory action is important to address the global water crisis. The international community must do more to prevent human-induced water scarcity, not only within States but equally in a transboundary context. This requires States to cooperate in managing transboundary surface soil, and ground water resources, maintaining riparian ecosystems, and conducting transboundary impact assessment studies for projects in order to cause no significant harm, build the resilience of affected communities, and mitigate any adverse impacts.

To that end, political dialogue and water diplomacy are critical in the framework of conflict-prevention and building opportunities for cooperation. Peace and sustainable development around shared water resources contribute to regional stability and integration. On the other hand, adopting policies of procrastination and negligence to transboundary water disputes will threaten regional peace and security. All riparian States are bound to respect the applicable rules of conventional and customary international law, including the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization, the obligation not to cause significant harm, and the principle of cooperation to ensure that projects that utilize transboundary water resources do not adversely affect the rights and interests of riparian States.

The only path to handle the global water crisis is that of greater cooperation, effective consultation and dialogue to reach legally binding consensual agreements. Transboundary basins have huge potentials that should be properly harnessed, in an inclusive manner based on consensus, in order to realize the collective water, food and energy securities of our States and peoples. In this context, Egypt has always valued cooperation within the Nile family. Egypt remains, as ever, committed to the right to development, especially in the Nile basin States, and to regional cooperation to achieve SDGs. Through efficient, adaptive and cooperative water management to harness the full potentials of the Nile, this river holds the promise of regional integration, trade and investment and the prosperity of all of its peoples. With this in mind, Egypt proposed the VIC-MED project to establish a sustainable navigational route between Lake Victoria and the Mediterranean, in order to build a development corridor, promote integration and alleviate poverty in all Nile basin states.

Realizing this vision requires careful reflection as to how we can attain the rights, interests and equities of all riparian states, simultaneously. It requires trust-building and inclusivity. In fact, there is a wealth of scientific evidence and objective studies that can support our efforts to reach our common goals. Achieving this vision requires real political will and a commitment not to instrumentalize water for political gains.

Departure from consensus undermines the spirit of cooperation. The international community should continue to call for further reflections on how to achieve an adequate balance between the equities of all States sharing the same transboundary water resource.

The UN 2026 Water Conference should serve to reach a common understanding to implement the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization and the obligation not to cause significant harm in a manner that maximizes the benefits to all states while simultaneously avoiding harm as far as possible. Water resources related developments in a basin State should not be a “*zero-sum game*” that must inevitably put riparian countries against each other. Neither does the development of some have to come at the expense of the survival of others, nor it should be at the detriment of the water resources and livelihoods on which the population so heavily depends.

Even though challenges in transboundary cooperation are mounting around the world, a positive development could be seen in the ongoing scientific leaps and innovations in water management. The technology available to forecast hydrological flows, anticipate disasters and extreme events and cooperate for the benefit of our peoples was not available before. Today, science and technological innovation show us that unity, cooperation and coordination are at our fingertips, and we must only reach out to seize the opportunity. During the UN 2026 Water Conference’s thematic debate on “Water for cooperation”, Member states can continue to focus on celebrating what brings us together, and resolving our differences, in order to adopt a vision that has the potential to unify us for a more prosperous future. In this vein, Egypt will continue to seek cooperation, peace, and fraternity among the Nile basin family.

Examining the issue from the prism of the five “*accelerators*” of SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, namely: *financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation, and governance*, the UN 2026 Water Conference’s thematic debate on “Water for Cooperation” could contribute to the following perspectives:

- The focus should be to accelerate the achievement of all water-related goals and targets contained in the 2030 Agenda, especially SDG6. Water scarcity remains a compound challenge, especially in transboundary contexts in Africa. We need to address it urgently to sustain life on our planet.
- Countries facing water scarcity should receive special support. Capacity building and training programs are needed, especially in developing countries, to build capacities in transboundary water negotiations and mediation.
- Water-Food-Energy-Ecosystem *WFEE* nexus cannot be addressed through unilateral actions. It has to be addressed in an inclusive approach, that is also

holistic and agreed upon, in order to secure sustainable supply of water for life, agriculture and food production, ecosystem services, as well as other economic, social and environmental benefits.

- New investment models and technologies are needed to increase knowledge about available water resources, including throughout the river basin and groundwater aquifers, and to enhance environmentally sustainable water related infrastructures. Addressing the accessibility and affordability of water technologies and innovations is pertinent.
- International financing and investments in transboundary basins should preserve ecosystems through focusing on environmentally sustainable infrastructures and services. International investments and assistance provided by states, specialized agencies, and partners, should respect the applicable principles of international law and adopt a human rights-based approach in designing and implementing water initiatives and plans.
- Inclusive transboundary cooperation over water resources is essential to peace and regional integration. We need commitment to promote mutual benefits and win-win cooperation among riparian countries. To that end, at the continent level, the African Ministers' Council on Water *AMCOW* promotes cooperation, security, social, and economic development through guiding towards the effective management of shared water resources in Africa.
- The best available science and knowledge must be applied, in addition to sharing good practices and experience. For instance, Egypt's Vision 2030 and the National Water Resources Plan (2017-2037) adopted a water policy that combines efficient use of renewable water resources and increasing reliance on non-conventional water sources. This was coupled with a food security policy that balances between food production and imports, in order to address Egypt's peculiar water situation.
- Water-related climate hazards are affecting peoples in transboundary basins. Disruption in the hydrological cycle gravely threatens food security, livelihoods and ecosystems, causing loss and damage, mostly in world's deltas. To that end, COP27 brought water discussions to the center of the climate discourse, by introducing the *AWARE* initiative "Action on Water Adaptation and Resilience" to propose and support mutually agreed policies for cooperative water-related adaptation and its co-benefits, while causing no harm. This conversation continued in the subsequent COPs.

IV. Recommendations:

- Political will and water diplomacy must be strengthened, including in the framework of conflict-prevention and building opportunities for cooperation to address the global water crisis. Transboundary water cooperation is essential for achieving the water-related goals and targets of Agenda 2030.
- The international community needs to do more to address the root challenges of transboundary cooperation. Cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination is vital in providing water security for all. We should adopt and promote integrated water resources management, at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation.
- Effective water cooperation through binding agreements and comprehensive non-selective application of the applicable principles of international law will promote peace and regional stability. On the other hand, the lack of impactful cooperation aggravates disputes, especially in the context of limited water availability, degradation of resources and associated ecosystem services due to unsustainable and maladaptive utilization of shared waters.
- It is essential to maintain and bolster cooperation among riparian states on the bases of the equality of rights, the community of interests, and the applicable principles of international law. Conforming with the principles of international law requires a comprehensive non-selective approach. A water use that does not conform with such principles is inherently inequitable.
- In accordance with international law, the pursuit of the equitable and reasonable utilization of shared water resources should not lead to the infliction of significant harm. In addition, the duty to cooperate includes, but is not limited to, prior notification and consultation on planned measures, undergoing adequate impact assessment studies, sharing data and monitoring, and joint forecasting and early warning.
- Science, technology and innovation, coupled with data sharing and joint forecasting and monitoring could contribute positively to transboundary water cooperation. We need to do more to support developing countries in that regard and ensure free access to knowledge and transfer of technology.

V. Guiding Questions:

1. How can countries advance the *WFEE* nexus at transboundary level? What barriers exist to its effective implementation, and how could we overcome these barriers? How to identify priorities of water uses, taking into account the critical “*Vital human needs*”?
2. What legal frameworks and strategies can be used to enhance the role of water cooperation as a driver of peace and security between communities, sectors and countries?
3. How can the role of multi-disciplinary technical, political and legal approach be enhanced to progress water cooperation, and ensure that scientific knowledge and innovation are effectively fed into policy processes and binding agreements?
4. What are the current gaps in capacity development and technologies related to water cooperation, especially in developing countries? How can the international community address those gaps, taking into account the existing capacity building platforms for South-South Cooperation?
5. How can platforms and initiatives for sharing data, knowledge and experiences, e.g., case studies, best practices and lessons learned, from one basin, country or region to another, be coordinated and improved? How can SDG target 6.5 best used to advance transboundary water cooperation?
6. How to build on existing inclusive transboundary arrangements, and create incentives, particularly within the context of high-level political will, to enter into additional arrangements? What barriers and solutions exist to overcome the challenges of developing effective and inclusive frameworks?