

2026 United Nations Water Conference Interactive Dialogue Concept Paper

UNITAR Global Water Academy

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Executive Summary

The 2026 United Nations Water Conference, co-hosted by the Republic of Senegal and the United Arab Emirates, will be held from 2 to 4 December 2026. As the world enters the final years of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this conference offers a decisive opportunity to accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6): Clean Water and Sanitation for All.

The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), through its Global Water Academy (UGWA), contributes as a member of UN-Water as co-coordinator of Capacity Development Initiative together with UNESCO and DESA, as co-convener – together with the World Bank Group and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) – of the interactive dialogue on Investments for Water: Financing, Technology, Innovation and Capacity-Building, as co-coordinator of Priority Collaborative Action 5 Task-force together with UNU-INWEH and UNESCO, and a member of taskforce Women and Water.

UNITAR's Global Water Academy builds on a global training and research network – CIFAL Global Network as well as UN CC:Learn and the LEAP-FAST higher-education leadership programme. Its active membership concerning Contributing Actions towards the United Nations System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation, co-leadership for PCA-5 and CDI, including co-convening roles with UNESCO, UNU-INWEH, UNDP, and UN DESA, UNITAR

strengthens the global enabling environment for water education, scientific cooperation, and capacity development.

This concept paper follows the official UN-Water Conference structure and addresses all six interactive dialogue themes:

- (a) Water for People – Human Rights to Water and Sanitation;
- (b) Water for Prosperity – Valuing Water and Integrated Water Resource Management;
- (c) Water for Planet – Climate, Biodiversity and Resilience;
- (d) Water for Cooperation – Transboundary and Scientific Collaboration;
- (e) Water in Multilateral Processes – SDG 6 and Global Water Initiatives; and
- (f) Investments for Water – Financing, Technology, Innovation and Capacity-Building.

Across these pillars, the paper highlights three strategic accelerators – Integration, Innovation, and Inclusion – that underpin UNITAR’s approach to water governance and capacity-building.

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I. Introduction

1. The 2026 United Nations Water Conference, mandated by General Assembly resolution 78/327, will take place from 2 to 4 December 2026 in the United Arab Emirates, co-hosted by the Republic of Senegal and the UAE.¹ It represents the first global opportunity since 2023 to translate commitments into measurable results and to build a coherent roadmap for SDG 6 implementation in the final years of the 2030 Agenda.
2. Within this architecture, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) stands as the UN system's principal institution for learning, research, and capacity development. Through its Global Water Academy (UGWA),² established in 2023 under the Division for People and Social Development, UNITAR provides a platform that combines scientific knowledge, policy guidance, and training to translate water governance challenges into capacity-building solutions.
3. UNITAR's participation in UN-Water and its co-leadership of the Priority Collaborative Action 5 (PCA-5) task force on *scientific cooperation and capacity development*, together with UNESCO and UNU-INWEH, positions the Institute at the intersection of research, diplomacy, and implementation. Through PCA-5 and related taskforces, UNITAR helps link the five SDG 6 accelerators (financing, data, capacity, innovation, governance) into a cohesive learning agenda.³
4. In its role as co-convener, alongside the World Bank Group and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), of the interactive dialogue on Investments for Water: Financing, Technology, Innovation and Capacity-Building, UNITAR serves as the voice of capacity development including in the financing ecosystem. This dialogue aims to bridge the gap between policy commitment and investment delivery, ensuring that financial flows translate into local skills, institutions, and impact.

¹ United Nations General Assembly (2024). Resolution 78/327: Convening of the 2026 United Nations Water Conference. New York: United Nations.

² The UNITAR Global Water Academy (UGWA) empowers learners all over the world with the knowledge and skills to respond to the global water sustainability crisis by providing hybrid training and online courses developed by global leaders in water research, resource management, and policy development; developing scientific and two-eyed water solutions to water sustainability; and by building the capacity and international partnerships necessary to achieve the objectives of UN SDG6. <https://globalwateracademy.org/>

³ UNEP (2024). Report 'Mid-term Status on SDG 6 Indicators: 6.3.2, 6.5.1, & 6.6.1' 27 August 2024, <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/mid-term-status-sdg-6-indicators-632-651-661-2024>

5. The Global Water Academy⁴ operates through the CIFAL Global Network,⁵ UNITAR's flagship network of city-based training centres. Centres such as CIFAL Surrey, CIFAL York, CIFAL Victoria, CIFAL Saudi Arabia, and CIFAL Banjul deliver localized programmes on WASH, water innovation, and climate adaptation. Their combined reach exceeds 20,000 participants since 2023 and demonstrates how the Academy links global knowledge with regional action.
6. In parallel, UNITAR's e-learning portfolio, particularly the e-learning course *Foundations of SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation*, developed with UN-Water entities and experts, provides the UN system's first fully online introductory training on SDG 6 policy architecture, implementation mechanisms, and indicator tracking.⁶ More than 1,000 learners have completed the course since its launch, enhancing capacity in government ministries, utilities, and civil society.
7. The Global Water Academy's mission is anchored in three principles, Integration, Innovation, and Inclusion, which guide UNITAR's strategic contribution to the 2026 Conference.
 - Integration connects SDG 6 targets (6.1–6.b) with cross-cutting goals on health, education, gender equality and climate resilience.
 - Innovation leverages science and digital tools to accelerate implementation.
 - Inclusion ensures that training and finance reach the most vulnerable communities.
8. This concept paper reflects UNITAR's system-wide commitment to support Member States in achieving SDG 6 by mobilizing partnerships across people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. It draws on UNITAR's direct experience through the CIFAL Global Network, UN CC:Learn⁷, and the LEAP-FAST⁸ programme, and provides a forward-looking framework for discussion and cooperation ahead of the Conference.

⁴ UNITAR Global Water Academy and Global Water Academy will be used interchangeably in this Paper.

⁵ The CIFAL Global Network is composed of 32 International Training Centres for Authorities and Leaders, all coordinated by UNITAR's Division for People. The strategic locations of the 32 centres, which can be found across Asia, Oceania, Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean ensure a global outreach. Each CIFAL centre provides innovative training and serves as a hub for the exchange of knowledge amongst government officials, the private sector, and civil society.

<https://unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/people/our-portfolio/cifal-global-network>

⁶ Accessible at <https://globalwateracademy.org/online-courses/>.

⁷ The One UN Climate Change Learning Partnership (UN CC:Learn) is a joint initiative of more than 30 multilateral organizations helping countries to achieve climate change action both through general climate literacy and applied skills development. UN CC:Learn provides strategic advice and quality learning resources to help people, governments and businesses to understand, adapt, and build resilience to climate change. <https://uncclearn.org/>

⁸ Leaders in higher Education Alliance and Programme – For Accelerating Sustainability Transformations (LEAP-FAST) initiative, developed by UNITAR, UNESCO and a group of Higher

II. Status and Trends

(a) Water for People – The Human Right to Water and Sanitation

9. Despite global progress, 2.2 billion people remain without safely managed drinking water and 3.5 billion without safely managed sanitation.⁹ The pace of change is insufficient to meet SDG 6.1 and 6.2 by 2030. Inequalities persist between urban and rural populations, and between gender groups. Women and girls shoulder a disproportionate burden: seven in ten women aged 15 and older are responsible for water collection, limiting their education and economic participation.¹⁰
10. The 2023 UN Water Conference reaffirmed the human rights to water and sanitation as non-negotiable foundations of human dignity. However, only half of countries have formally incorporated these rights into national legislation.¹¹ UNITAR's capacity programmes aim to bridge this gap by helping policymakers translate rights into budgeted plans and measurable targets.
11. Through "Streams of Change" webinar series, initiated in 2025 by Global Water Academy, UNITAR has piloted expert knowledge sharing initiative for academia, civil society and local governments on rights-based water management. These efforts directly advance SDG indicators 6.1.1 and 6.2.1.

(b) Water for Prosperity – Valuing Water and Integrated Management

12. Global data show that the implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) increased from 49 to 57 per cent between 2017 and 2023.¹² Yet, at current rates, the world will not reach the target of 91 per cent IWRM implementation by 2030. Fragmented institutions and under-funded basin authorities remain critical constraints.

Education Institutions (HEIs), that aims to create a movement of committed sustainability leaders in higher education to advance deep transformations and enable HEIs to fulfil their potential with regards to contributing to the SDGs. <https://highereducation.unsdglearn.org/>

⁹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2025). The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025. New York

¹⁰ UNICEF and WHO (2023) Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022: special focus on gender. New York: United Nations

¹¹ UN-Water, Water Facts: Human Rights to Water and Sanitation <https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/human-rights-water-and-sanitation> and UN-Water Roadmap for the Integration of Human Rights to Water and Sanitation

¹² United Nations Environment Programme. Integrated Water Resources Management Data Portal Tracking SDG 6.5.1 (accessible at <https://iwrmdataportal.unepdhi.org/>).

13. UNITAR's CIFAL Philippines and CIFAL Surrey has developed courses linking IWRM with the water-energy-food nexus, focusing on efficiency and green innovation. CIFAL York and CIFAL Victoria apply these principles in Canadian contexts through urban water resilience and First Nations partnerships. These trainings operationalize SDG 6.4 and 6.5 while strengthening interlinkages with SDGs 8 and 9.
14. UNITAR's training analytics indicate a rising demand for technical courses on data governance, valuation of ecosystem services, and circular economy approaches in water management. UGWA and CIFAL York and York University joint "Introduction to Big Data for Water Sustainability" course link closely to the UN-Water Analytical Brief on Water for Climate Mitigation.¹³

(c) Water for Planet – Climate, Biodiversity, and Resilience

15. More than half of countries report deterioration of water-related ecosystems, while freshwater species populations have declined by 81 per cent since 1970. Droughts and floods account for nine of ten disasters linked to natural hazards.¹⁴ Climate change is tightening the water cycle and exacerbating inequalities.
16. UNITAR, through UN CC:Learn, supports countries in developing and implementing National Climate Change Learning Strategies, aligned with National Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) with integrated water components. These efforts directly contribute to SDG 6.6.

(d) Water for Cooperation – Transboundary and Scientific Collaboration

17. Transboundary water resources support over 3 billion people. Yet only 43 countries maintain operational agreements covering 90 per cent of shared basins.¹⁵ PCA-5, co-led by UNITAR, UNESCO, and UNU-INWEH, aims to create a Global Water Science and Capacity Hub to share data and good practice among basin organizations.

¹³ UN-Water Analytical Brief on Water for Climate Mitigation (2025) 15th meeting of the Task Force on Water and Climate 21st March 2025, Geneva.

¹⁴ UNEP (2024) Triennial Reports: Mid-term Status on SDG 6 Indicators: 6.3.2, 6.5.1, & 6.6.1. [SDG 6.3.2 – Progress on Ambient Water Quality with a special focus on Health](#) [SDG 6.5.1 – Progress on the Implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management with special focus on Climate Change](#), [SDG 6.6.1 – Progress on Water-related Ecosystems with a special focus on Biodiversity](#)

¹⁵ UNECE (2024) Progress on Transboundary Water Cooperation under the Water Convention: Third Report on Implementation of the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. Geneva

18. UNITAR's role in the taskforce focuses on scientific diplomacy and knowledge brokering. Training modules developed for the UN-Water family help translate technical knowledge into negotiation capacity, supporting SDG targets 6.5 and 6.a.

(e) Water in Multilateral Processes – SDG 6 and Global Water Initiatives

19. Since the 2023 Conference, the appointment of the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water and the launch of the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation (2024) have re-energized multilateral engagement. However, coordination across UN agencies and financial institutions remains uneven.
20. UNITAR's Division for People and Social Development serves as the entry point for capacity-building in these processes. Through its training on results-based water governance, it helps Member States link SDG 6 monitoring with reporting on the UNSDCF and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

(f) Investments for Water – Financing, Technology and Capacity

21. According to the World Bank and OECD, the global investment gap for water infrastructure is USD 6.7 trillion through 2030. Only 8.9 per cent of ODA targets the water sector, and private investment accounts for less than 2 per cent.¹⁶ Climate finance allocated to water remains below 3 per cent of total flows.
22. As co-convener of the Investments for Water dialogue, UNITAR is working with IFAD and the World Bank to create an Investment Partnership Working Group (IPWG) that links finance, technology and capacity-building streams. The Group focuses on three core outputs: (i) a capacity framework for investment readiness, (ii) a learning platform for innovative finance, and (iii) a repository of bankable project models for SDG 6.
23. UNITAR is to initiate a *Water Finance Learning Pathways Series* for ministries of finance, utilities, and municipal governments, to strengthen understanding of risk assessment, impact measurement and public-private partnership management.

III. Challenges and Emerging Issues

¹⁶ A Andres, Luis Alberto; Bahuguna, Aroha; Hoo, Yi Rong; Joseph, George; Wang, Qiao. (2024) *Funding a Water-Secure Future : An Assessment of Global Public Spending (English)*. Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099050624154572979>

24. A widening gap between commitments and delivery.

Although the 2023 Conference produced more than 800 voluntary commitments under the Water Action Agenda, fewer than 40 per cent include an identified funding mechanism or timeline.¹⁷ This implementation deficit is particularly acute in least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS), where financial flows are inconsistent and institutional capacities limited.

25. Inequality and fragility.

By 2025 half of humanity will live in water-stressed areas.¹⁸ Inequalities persist between regions: in sub-Saharan Africa only 26 per cent of the population has access to safely managed drinking-water, compared with 94 per cent in Europe and Northern America. Fragile and conflict-affected settings face dual pressures of infrastructure collapse and displacement; more than 420 million children now live in crisis contexts where unsafe water poses a higher mortality risk than direct violence.¹⁹ UNITAR's work through Streams of Change Webinars of Global Water Academy in collaboration with CIFAL Bangkok and CIFAL Surrey demonstrates that sustained local training in WASH governance can mitigate such disparities.

26. Governance fragmentation.

Most countries manage water across several ministries with overlapping mandates. Less than one-third report high levels of community participation in water-resources management.²⁰ Weak coordination also hampers vertical integration: national strategies rarely align with municipal budgeting cycles. This institutional dissonance limits uptake of innovative technologies and constrains cross-sector efficiency.

27. Climate intensification.

Nine of ten natural disasters are water-related, and droughts alone cause average annual losses exceeding USD 300 billion.²¹ Climate-driven water

¹⁷ UN DESA & UN-Water (2024). Progress Update on the Water Action Agenda Commitments. New York / Geneva.

¹⁸ UN World Water Development Report (2024). Water for Shared Prosperity. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

¹⁹ UNICEF (2019). Fast Facts: WASH in Conflict. New York.

²⁰ UNESCO (2024) The United Nations World Water Development Report 2024: water for prosperity and peace; facts, figures and action examples. Perugia.

²¹ UNDRR (2025). Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2025: Resilience Pays: Financing and Investing for our Future. Geneva.

extremes undermine agriculture, energy production, and human health. Adaptation financing for water remains small, only USD 14 billion in 2023, roughly 3 per cent of global climate finance.²² This creates a mismatch between the scale of risk and available resources.

28. Scientific and data divides.

While big-data and Earth-observation tools now enable near-real-time hydrological monitoring, fewer than 40 per cent of countries systematically collect data on SDG 6 indicators.²³ Developing countries often lack trained personnel or digital infrastructure to process data for decision-making. Through PCA-5, UNITAR, UNESCO and UNU-INWEH are addressing this gap by developing a *Water Science Cooperation Platform* to harmonize training and metadata standards.

29. Innovation bottlenecks.

Innovation diffusion remains slow. Only 15 per cent of low-income countries report active adoption of smart-metering or leakage-detection systems.²⁴ Barriers include limited R&D investment, risk-averse utilities, and absence of blended-finance mechanisms. UNITAR's engagement with IFAD and the World Bank seeks to connect innovation accelerators with financial instruments and technical-training pipelines.

30. Financing deficits and limited investment readiness.

Underinvestment persists across the sector. Public budgets often prioritize short-term service delivery over long-term resilience. Most ministries of finance lack dedicated staff with expertise in water economics or impact evaluation. A 2024 research with 293 water professionals showed that valuing water is gaining popularity among policymakers and academics as a new water management paradigm. However, there is a lack of clarity about how to translate this paradigm into practice.²⁵ Valuing water requires the development and application of mechanisms and institutions for effective stakeholder participation in decision-making, especially in the context of significant power

²² Climate Policy Initiative (2021). *Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2021*. San Francisco.

²³ UNSD (2024). *The Sustainable Development Goals Extended Report 2024: SDG6 Clean Water and Sanitation*

²⁴ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2025) *2025 Technology and Innovation Report Inclusive Artificial Intelligence for Development*. Geneva

²⁵ Christopher Schulz, Lukas J. Wolf, Julia Martin-Ortega, Klaus Glenk, Maarten Gischler, (2024) *Valuing water: A global survey of the values that underpin water decisions, Environmental Science & Policy*, 153: 103685.

differentials between relevant stakeholders. This skills gap limits the capacity to absorb external funding.

31. Emerging issues since 2023.

- Rapid urbanization in Africa and Asia is outpacing service expansion.
- Digital transformation introduces cybersecurity risks for utilities.
- Groundwater depletion threatens agricultural livelihoods, especially in semi-arid regions.
- Youth and women remain under-represented in decision-making, despite being central to innovation ecosystems.
- The intersection of water and migration is growing in policy relevance.

32. Synergies and interlinkages.

Water challenges are not isolated. Progress on SDG 6 catalyses advances on health (SDG 3), gender (SDG 5), energy (SDG 7), climate (SDG 13) and partnerships (SDG 17). Conversely, failure to address water scarcity undermines economic growth (SDG 8) and social cohesion (SDG 16). UNITAR's approach therefore emphasizes systems thinking and integrated learning across these interdependencies.

33. Opportunities amidst challenges.

Emerging financing instruments, such as green bonds, outcome-based contracts and impact investment, offer potential leverage if human capacity accompanies capital. Digital tools and South–South cooperation platforms are lowering knowledge barriers. These opportunities form the basis for the solution pathways outlined in Section IV.

IV. Solutions

34. The solutions proposed below are action-oriented, scalable and pragmatic, reflecting UNITAR's comparative advantage in training, facilitation and partnership-building. Each subsection corresponds to one of the official dialogue themes.

(a) Water for People – Equity, Rights and Resilience

35. Embed human-rights approaches in governance.

UNITAR recommends that governments incorporate the human rights to water and sanitation into national constitutions and sector plans, supported by

measurable indicators. *Streams of Change Webinar Series* of UNITAR Global Water Academy concentrates on the Rights Based Water Governance for 2026, are work in progress by UNITAR Global Water Academy, to guide governments, local governments and academia in drafting rights-based WASH strategies.

36. Build local accountability mechanisms.

At the Member State level (i.e. in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan), and at local government level through CIFAL Global Network, over 1 000 government officials (national/local) and experts will be trained on integrating citizen feedback in service monitoring by the end of International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2028.²⁶

37. Strengthen education and behavioural change.

The UNITAR Global Water Academy *Foundations of SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation* e-course reached participants from more than a hundred countries in 2025. Scaling such digital learning, coupled with national curricula reforms, can close awareness gaps and empower youth.

(b) Water for Prosperity – Integration and Efficiency

38. Institutionalize IWRM capacity.

UNITAR proposes a *National IWRM Leadership Programme* to be implemented through the CIFAL Global Network, (to be piloted with CIFAL York, CIFAL Bangkok, CIFAL Singapore and CIFAL Surrey) aligning training with water-management authorities. Custodian agencies of SDG6 will be invited to join the Programme. Initial pilots will take place in Canada, Thailand and UK is expected to demonstrate cross-sector capacity development on water data management systems.

39. Operationalize the water–energy–food nexus.

UNITAR and CIFAL Istanbul, in partnership with FAO Türkiye is offering an applied training package on water and food security training for women cooperatives to increase resource efficiency and circular-economy models for agriculture sector. This contributes to SDG 6.4 (water-use efficiency) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption).

²⁶ United Nations General Assembly declared 2018-2028 as the International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development”.

40. Digitalization for economic transformation.

Leveraging UN DP's Digital Public Infrastructure framework, UNITAR CIFAL Singapore, CIFAL Bangkok and CIFAL York are drafting artificial-intelligence modules for training on smarter investment decisions.²⁷

(c) Water for Planet – Nature-Based and Climate Solutions

41. Scale nature-based solutions.

Through UN CC:Learn and UN Environment Programme collaborations, UNITAR trains officials to design projects integrating wetlands restoration, urban green infrastructure and reforestation for water-catchment protection. These solutions simultaneously advance SDG 6.6 and SDG 13.

42. Integrate water into climate finance.

The *Water and Climate Finance Clinic*, to be proposed to IFAD and World Bank, the co-conveners of UN Water Theme: Capacity Development, alongside UNITAR, open to participation to Thematic Working Group Members from other UN agencies, to support ministries to frame water as an adaptation co-benefit in Green Climate Fund proposals.

43. Promote data-driven resilience.

PCA-5's Global Water Science Hub is developing open-access geospatial dashboards that merge hydrological and socio-economic data to inform planning in vulnerable basins.

(d) Water for Cooperation – Transboundary and Scientific Diplomacy

44. Establish a Global Water Diplomacy Fellowship.

UNITAR is proposing to design a fellowship program for mid-career professionals from states to strengthen negotiation and data-sharing skills. The proposal is being drafted within the framework of PCA-5, in collaboration with Azerbaijan and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Each cohort expects 15 fellows annually from respective countries.

45. Joint Monitoring Mechanisms.

UNITAR supports UN System wide strategy on Water and Sanitation with development of standardized monitoring templates that enable shared early-

²⁷ UNDP (2025). Digital Public Infrastructure for Water Management Toolkit. New York

warning systems and joint flood-risk assessments. Such cooperation advances SDG 6.5.2.

47. Science and Policy Interface.

UNITAR Global Water Academy initiates an annual *Science-Policy Dialogues on Water and Peace* linking academic findings with basin-level decision-makers, thereby institutionalizing scientific cooperation. This will be launched in January 2026, during the 2026 UN Water Conference Preparatory Meeting in Dakar, and in UN Water Conference in co-hosted by UAE and Senegal in December 2026.

(e) Water in Multilateral Processes – Coherence and Accountability

48. Embed water in global governance frameworks.

UNITAR advocates integrating water into Higher Education Institutions curriculum through its LEAP-FAST Program, implemented together with UNESCO.²⁸ UN DESA and UN Water to ensure water indicators appear across the UN Sustainable Development Group's six Transformative Transitions.²⁹ The fourth transformative entry points or - key transition that is described to have catalytic and multiplier effects across the SDGs includes 'education'. UNITAR and UNESCO, in collaboration with a group of universities led by Majmaah University have launched a new initiative "Leaders in Higher Education Alliance and Programme – For Accelerating Sustainability Transformations" (LEAP-FAST) aimed at creating a movement of committed sustainability leaders in higher education to advance deep transformations and enable HEIs to fulfil their potential with regards to contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals.

49. Capacity for integrated reporting.

A new UNITAR Division for People and Social Development report UNSDCF Mapping: LDCs, SIDSs, LLDCs will have an annex report on *Water in LDCs, SIDSs, LLDCs*, to guide UNITAR strategic planning for capacity development programs concerning SDG6. It aims to customize training for governments linking SDG 6 data with national planning instruments. This enhances evidence-based policymaking and cross-sector coherence.

(f) Investments for Water – Financing, Technology, Innovation and Capacity-Building

²⁸ <https://highereducation.unsdglearn.org/>

²⁹ UN Sustainable Development Group (2025). Six Transformative Transitions – Inter-linkages with Water. New York.

49. Create a Water Finance Learning Pathways Series.

Hosted within the UNITAR Global Water Academy, the training will deliver tailored training for ministries of finance, utilities and local authorities on creditworthiness, impact assessment and outcome-based contracting. It will also function as a repository for innovative investment models.

50. Mobilize blended finance.

By pairing training with transaction advisory, the UNITAR Global Water Academy will help governments structure public-private partnerships (PPPs) for WASH and water-resource infrastructure. Pilot initiative include Saudi Arabia, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan to mobilize blended investments by 2027.

51. Innovate through technology partnerships.

UNITAR's Global Water Academy is drafting collaborations with tech incubators and companies to introduce youth training in Central and Eastern Europe.

52. Gender and inclusion in finance.

All investment-training streams integrate gender-responsive budgeting and inclusion metrics, ensuring that women and youth participate in project preparation and benefit from financial returns.

53. Knowledge management.

A dedicated *Water Investments Portal*, jointly managed with UN DESA and OECD, will disseminate case studies, cost-benefit analyses and toolkits. This portal will link directly with the Water Action Agenda repository, reinforcing transparency and accountability.

V. Recommendations and Conclusions

55. A renewed global contract for water.

The 2026 United Nations Water Conference must go beyond declarations toward an actionable *Compact for Water and Human Development*. UNITAR recommends that Member States adopt a results-oriented framework that embeds accountability, measurable milestones and peer-learning mechanisms within the Water Action Agenda and UNITAR co-facilitates joint sessions Member State and Scientific Community Leaders at 2026 Conference.³⁰

³⁰ UN-Water (*work in progress*) Concept Note for the 2026 UN Water Conference. Geneva.

56. Strengthen governance and accountability.

Governments should mainstream human-rights-based approaches in national water strategies. Legally recognising the right to safe water and sanitation must be accompanied by budgetary allocation and transparent monitoring. UNITAR's proposed training modules on *Rights-Based Governance* can be integrated into civil-service academies to sustain institutional memory.³¹

57. Integrate water across public-finance systems.

Most ministries of finance still treat water as a cost rather than an asset. UNITAR proposes the creation of *Water Finance Learning Pathways Series*, cross-ministerial teams that coordinate with environment, agriculture, and planning ministries to integrate water into public-expenditure frameworks. This will allow tracking of both fiscal and social returns.

58. Scale capacity development through networks.

The CIFAL Global Network should serve as the backbone of regional water-leadership academies. UNITAR will invite Member States to host additional centres in Central Asia, Latin America and Africa focused on transboundary cooperation, water security and financing. Each academy would combine e-learning, mentoring and on-the-ground demonstrations.

59. Institutionalize the science-policy-finance interface.

UNITAR, UNU-INWEH and UNESCO propose establishing a *Water Science Diplomacy Hub* under PCA-5. This programme would equip scientists and diplomats with negotiation, foresight and communication skills, strengthening the bridge between research and investment.³²

60. Promote gender equality and inclusion.

Investment frameworks must include gender-responsive budgeting and track the proportion of women in technical and leadership positions. UNITAR's LEAP-FAST programme in partnership with UNESCO demonstrates how integrating gender training in higher education creates durable systemic change.

61. Ensure coherence with multilateral agendas.

Water should feature prominently in forthcoming milestones, the *Summit of the Future (2025)*, the *World Social Summit (2025)*, and the mid-term review of the

³¹ UNITAR (*work-in-progress*). Training Manual on Rights-Based Water Governance. Geneva.

³² Strengthening Priority Collaborative Action 5, Mobilizing Academic and Scientific Networks to Elevate the Ambition of the UN Water 2026 and 2028 Conferences

SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework (2027). UNITAR will coordinate with UN DESA and the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Water to maintain policy alignment.

62. Build resilience through nature and innovation.

CIFAL Global Network and UNITAR Global Water Academy will continue their growing training programs at the local level through enhanced engagement with local governments and stakeholders to build ecosystem valuation. CIFAL Global Network's city-level partners and training centers will continue serving strategic implementers of UNITAR commitments to build resilience through nature and innovation for SDG6. UNITAR as a member of ITU-led United 4 Smart Sustainable Cities platform will provide training and awareness initiatives to build resilience through nature and innovation.

63. Track progress and accountability.

A global *Water Action Review Mechanism*, coordinated by UN-Water, should monitor voluntary commitments every two years, drawing lessons from the High-Level Political Forum methodology.³³ UNITAR's experience in training on indicator 6.a.1 can support Member States in this reporting process.

64. Conclusion.

Water is both a human right and a foundation of peace, prosperity and planetary stability. Yet without accelerated investment in human and institutional capacity, financial resources alone cannot deliver change. The 2026 Conference offers a unique moment to embed learning and leadership into the heart of water governance. UNITAR stands ready to work with all partners to translate knowledge into action, and action into sustainable transformation.

VI. Guiding Questions

67. To inform the interactive dialogue and national consultations, the following guiding questions are proposed. They align with the six official themes and encourage Member States to identify actionable commitments for the post-2026 cycle.

(a) Water for People

³³ UN-Water (2024). Methodological Guide for Indicator 6.a.1 Capacity Development Tracking. Geneva.

- How can Member States operationalize the human rights to water and sanitation through legislation, budgets and accountability?
- Which capacity-development models have proven most effective in reaching vulnerable communities and fragile contexts?
- What role can e-learning and digital literacy play in empowering youth and women in WASH governance?

(b) Water for Prosperity

- How can IWRM be fully institutionalized at national and basin levels, and what incentives can promote inter-sectoral efficiency?
- What mechanisms can ensure that the valuation of water ecosystems informs national accounting and investment decisions?
- How can innovation ecosystems and SMEs be integrated into national water-economy strategies?

(c) Water for Planet

- What proportion of national climate-finance portfolios currently address water, and how can this be increased?
- How can nature-based and digital solutions be scaled to strengthen resilience and biodiversity outcomes?
- Which metrics best capture the co-benefits of water for climate adaptation and disaster-risk reduction?

(d) Water for Cooperation

- How can scientific cooperation enhance transboundary water diplomacy and conflict prevention?
- What governance mechanisms are required to operationalize shared monitoring and data exchange?
- How can South–South and triangular cooperation amplify regional learning and resource mobilization?

(e) Water in Multilateral Processes

- How can coherence be ensured between SDG 6 implementation and broader multilateral frameworks such as the Summit of the Future, COP processes and the World Social Summit?
- What institutional innovations are needed within the UN system to deliver on the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation (2024)?
- How can inter-agency training platforms like UNITAR's Global Water Academy support the UN's Transformative Transitions?

(f) Investments for Water

- What policy and regulatory reforms can create enabling environments for blended and private investment?
- How can national investment readiness be measured, and what tools are required to improve it?
- What role should international financial institutions play in linking financing with technology transfer and local capacity?
- How can gender-responsive financing frameworks be embedded in project design and evaluation?

68. Responses to these questions should inform a concise set of voluntary commitments under the *Water Action Agenda 2026–2030*, with UNITAR, IFAD and the World Bank supporting follow-up through the IPWG and the Global Water Academy.

Appendix I – Acronyms

CIFAL – *Centre International de Formation des Autorités et Leaders / Centro Internacional de Formación para Autoridades y Líderes*
IFAD – International Fund for Agricultural Development
IWRM – Integrated Water Resources Management
LEAP-FAST– Leaders in Higher Education Alliance and Programme – For Accelerating Sustainability Transformations (run by UNITAR)
ODA – Official Development Assistance
PCA – Priority Collaborative Action
UGWA – UNITAR Global Water Academy
UN CC:Learn – The One UN Climate Change Learning Partnership
UN DESA – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNU-INWEH – United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health
WASH – Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WB – World Bank