

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL



Water needs a permanent home at the UN

2026 United Nations Water Conference - Policy Paper

From December 8 to 10, 2026, the **third United Nations Water Conference** will be held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates - co-hosted by the Republic of Senegal and the United Arab Emirates - convened only three years after the 2023 Conference in New York, and forty-nine years after the first, in Mar del Plata in 1977. Positioned between that milestone, the **upcoming 2028 Conference** in Tajikistan, and the fast-approaching **2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals**, Abu Dhabi must serve as the ultimate test of multilateralism's ability to deliver, at a time when climate, biodiversity, food and water crises are converging into a single, interconnected polycrisis.

With **2.1 billion people** still lacking safely managed drinking water, and **3.4 billion** without safely managed sanitation, the world remains severely off track on SDG 6. Achieving universal access will require an **eightfold** acceleration for drinking water, a **sixfold increase** for sanitation and a **twofold** for basic hygiene. Water is the cornerstone of climate resilience, global security, human dignity, and ecosystem survival, and must be governed both, as a human right requiring fully funded public services, and as a biocultural common good requiring dedicated guardianship.

Water must also be recognized as a carrier of cultural memory, knowledge and identity, whose protection requires safeguarding the relationships between communities, territories and freshwater ecosystems.

The Butterfly Effect Coalition renews its call to declare the global water crisis at the UN, in the same way as the climate crisis, a political recognition still outstanding, and more urgent than ever.

Our main recommendations to strengthen international water governance



**Establish
regular UN
meetings on
water &
system-wide
coherence**



**Institutionalize
a UN civil
society
participation
mechanism**



**Defining the
post 2030
horizon and
carrying SDG
6's ambition
forward**





PILLAR I: ESTABLISH REGULAR UN MEETINGS ON WATER & SYSTEM-WIDE COHERENCE

The 46-year gap between the 1977 Mar del Plata Conference and the 2023 New York Conference, severely fragmented global water diplomacy. While the 2023 Conference, the appointment of the UN Special Envoy on Water, and the UN system-wide Strategy on Water and Sanitation restored momentum, multilateralism cannot rely on ad-hoc gatherings.

The Butterfly Effect calls on Member States and international institutions to:

Establish permanent intergovernmental meetings on water at the UN:

- **Mandate a permanent, predictable calendar** of UN intergovernmental technical and political meetings and conferences on water beyond the 2028 Tajikistan Conference, establishing a regular 2 to 3 year cycle;
- **Integrate these meetings into** the official calendar of **the UN General Assembly and ECOSOC**, including HLPF, to ensure formal accountability and binding follow-up mechanisms.
- **Work towards negotiated outcomes** of future UN Water Conferences to integrate key decisions and recommendations in a formal text and galvanize collective action.

Strengthen the UN Special Envoy on Water mandate

- **Establish an advisory board to the Special Envoy** composed of representatives from major groups and other stakeholders to enhance broader and inclusive perspectives in the decision-making process.

Operationalize the UN System-wide Strategy on Water and Sanitation

- **Ensure all UN agencies translate their endorsement** of the UN System-wide Strategy on Water and Sanitation into concrete implementation within their strategic frameworks;
- **Ensure the HLPF's existing annual review of SDG17 explicitly tracks progress** on overcoming institutional silos and enhancing joint operational efficiency on the ground



PILLAR II: INSTITUTIONALIZE A UN CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION MECHANISM

Policy decisions made at international summits often fail to translate into tangible progress at the local level because local communities, women, youth, indigenous people and local civil society organizations are often not informed of these decisions and are excluded from governance structures. Meaningful participation is a prerequisite for democratic governance and effective water management.

Create an official UN civil society mechanism for water

- **Formally institutionalize a UN Civil Society & Stakeholder mechanism on water**, inspired by the Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security, the HLPF / UN DESA mechanism or the Civil Society Engagement Mechanism for the UNCCD COP, to grant major groups and other stakeholders including women, CSOs, youth, and local communities structural self-organized representation in all UN Water conferences.
- **Ensure that civil society representatives have speaking rights, access to drafting sessions and direct participation in UN interactive dialogues**, with inputs integrated into the official outcomes of the Conference (Summary of Proceedings). Online participation should also be facilitated and selection of participants should ensure diversity.

Guarantee direct and equitably distributed financial support

- **Establish a dedicated UN Trust Fund to finance the participation of civil society delegates**, particularly from the Global South, marginalized communities, women-led groups, and youth organizations, at all UN Water Conferences and preparatory processes meetings.

The Fund should guarantee a minimum allocation or quota specifically reserved for Global South and grassroots delegates, to ensure that funding decisions do not default to better-resourced or already well-connected organizations.

- **Eliminate administrative and financial barriers** that disproportionately exclude grassroots civil society actors **by providing accessible and transparent application procedures**, and advance support covering travel, visas, interpretation and accessibility enabling participation by grassroots organizations.



PILLAR III: DEFINING THE POST 2030 HORIZON AND CARRYING SDG 6'S AMBITION FORWARD

As the 2030 SDG deadline nears, Member States must agree on a shared course of action to carry SDG 6's ambition forward, demonstrating that multilateralism can still unite nations around common goals.

This calls for a staged roadmap across 2026-2028, in which each milestone builds deliberately on the last. The 2026 UN Water Conference should anchor political commitment, notably through a General Assembly resolution mandating regular intergovernmental meetings on water; the 2027 SDG Summit should then serve as an accountability checkpoint, reaffirming the centrality of financing and the human rights to water and sanitation within the broader 2030 Agenda review; and by 2028, these commitments should be formalized into a durable intergovernmental mechanism, with agreement on the water-related targets and monitoring frameworks that will carry SDG 6's ambition beyond 2030.

Adopt a common position to extend SDG 6 beyond 2030

- **Adopt a UN General Assembly resolution** - or a dedicated post-2030 water agenda - **formally extending SDG 6's core targets beyond 2030**, ensuring political continuity, and preventing a loss of momentum and comparability in global water data. Regardless of how the post-2030 agenda is ultimately structured, water must also be mainstreamed as a cross-cutting issue across other goals, rather than depending solely on a single, standalone target.
- **Design future monitoring and target frameworks** around processes and outcomes - not merely investment volumes or infrastructure built - **in line with the criteria and principles of the human rights to water and sanitation**, to ensure that post-2030 targets measure real impact on access, rights, and resilience.

Streamlined and interoperable post-2030 monitoring

- **Ensure that UN-Water's Integrated Monitoring Initiative** (or equivalent multi-agency monitoring architecture) **is carried forward beyond 2030**, as the water sector's permanent data backbone, regardless of which successor framework follows the SDGs.
- **Build stronger linkages between post-2030 water indicators and those of the Rio Conventions** - particularly on water scarcity, water-related ecosystems, and climate-water resilience - to create a more coherent evidence base and reduce duplicative reporting burdens on States. **This interoperability must not come at the expense of SDG 6's dedicated indicators for the human rights to water and sanitation** (including safely managed services, affordability, continuity and inequalities) which have no equivalent under the Rio Conventions and must be preserved as stand-alone, non-negotiable metrics.
- **Data should be disaggregated by gender, age, disability, and territory, with privacy safeguards and community participation in defining the relevant measures**, including data produced by local communities and civil society. Mandate the systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data on water, sanitation and hygiene access, **tied to guaranteed participation of women in decision-making bodies** (basin committees, water user associations, national institutions), transforming gender equity from a stated principle into measurable, trackable commitments. This same model should be explicitly extended to Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities, ensuring their participation is likewise binding and trackable.

Capacity building for local and basin-level authorities and stakeholders

- **Direct existing capacity-building, technical training, and knowledge-sharing resources toward local and basin-level actors**, including **Indigenous Peoples** and **on-the-ground implementers** to enable their substantive participation in the decision-making bodies. Rather than creating new ones, this approach should address the persistent gap between international governance commitments and local realities, and **enable bottom-up reporting** as a genuine complement to political declarations.
- **Include mechanisms to document, preserve and transmit local, Indigenous and traditional water knowledge** across generations, strengthening its contribution to long-term water governance.

Promote sustainable resource governance within hydrological boundaries

- **Set post-2030 targets that keep integrated water resources management within safe hydrological limits explicitly accounting for water quality alongside quantity.** Water allocation must prioritize the human rights to drinking water and sanitation over other demands, consistent with, and reinforcing SDG6's existing targets, and prohibit activities whose impact on water quality would compromise these rights.

Sustainable and predictable financing for post-2030 mechanisms

- **Secure sustainable, adequate, and predictable financing for post-2030 SDG 6 mechanisms**, moving away from ad hoc short-term contributions, **toward core, dedicated funding lines, and increased, transparent ODA, dedicated to water, sanitation, and hygiene.** Guard against future budgetary regression through a binding no-regression clause, ensuring funding levels achieved cannot be unilaterally reduced.

(see "investments for water" below for the Butterfly Effect's broader financing principles)

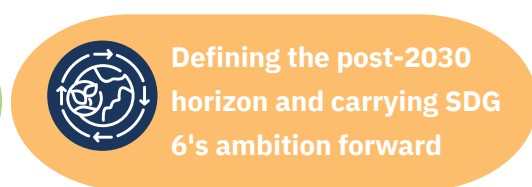
Our main recommendations on the interactive dialogues

Interactive dialogue A : Water for people

- **Enshrine the human rights to water and sanitation** in legislation, constitutions, and regulations, backed **by enforceable, actionable remedies** - judicial recourse - for individuals and communities when these rights are denied, and **by strong, integrated legislative frameworks and national strategies** that strengthen operational and financial planning for the sector, recognizing water, simultaneously as a human right, and a biocultural common good, whilst integrating scientific, Indigenous, traditional and community knowledge into water governance.
- **Recognize the central role of local authorities and community-based organizations** in water and sanitation management, and **prioritize investment in basic infrastructure for rural and peri-urban areas**, including through dedicated community resilience funds.
- **Prioritize the protection and continuity of WASH services in crisis contexts** through flexible financing mechanisms, protection of essential infrastructure, and safe access **for displaced populations and host communities, alike.**
- **Connect WASH continuity with safety and care** by **ensuring that climate-resilient WASH services** in schools, health facilities and displacement settings **address menstrual health, sexual and reproductive health needs**, safety from gender-based violence and the unequal burden of unpaid water collection and care.
- **Place marginalized communities at the center of WASH governance and service delivery**, ensuring women, youth, Indigenous People's meaningful involvement **through employment, safety guarantees, and access to vocational training, paired with WASH policies that explicitly address gender, race, age, territorial and climate-related inequalities**, including disparities between rural, peri-urban and urban areas, between upstream and downstream communities sharing the same water resource, and between formal and informal settlements.

Interactive dialogue E : Water for multilateral processes

see our detailed recommendations above



- **Ensure water is a standing agenda item across all relevant multilateral processes** - climate, food, health, energy and biodiversity conference alike - **breaking down the sectoral silos** that continue to fragment global water governance, in line with our call for a permanent intergovernmental body on water, and formal civil society participation (see Pillars I and II).
- **Establish a public, periodic, indicator-based multilateral monitoring mechanism** to track compliance with international commitments on water, sanitation and hygiene, **linking global commitments to funded national plans, transparent periodic reviews**, and the formal participation of civil society and local communities.
- **Anticipate the post-2030 agenda** by ensuring integrated water management including quality issues, delivery of safe water, sanitation and hygiene are prominently and permanently integrated into it, **building on strengthened global water governance mechanisms that draw on science, traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and open information systems** (see Pillar III).

While our institutional and civil society governance work anchors our engagement in IDA and IDE, the Butterfly Effect further aligns with the following cross-cutting positions emerging across the remaining dialogues:

Water for prosperity

Redefine water as a common good by embedding cultural, social, and right-based dimensions into investment frameworks; **enforce equitable allocation and strict accountability** for large commercial users, while expanding public funding for local climate adaptation and circular water systems and **ensure governments and businesses use acknowledged standards, protocols and regulations** as tools for good management, procurement and permits.

Water for planet

Accelerate the shift to agroecology and community-governed nature-based solutions, ensuring robust safeguards against land and water grabbing, while establishing binding protections for strategic biomes, aquifers, and freshwater ecosystems; **make water resilience mandatory in NDCs, and institutionalize community-led monitoring** and early warning systems.

Water for cooperation

Mandate the formal inclusion of youth, civil society, and local communities in transboundary, regional and sub-national basin management; ensure full ratification, implementation, and honoring of core international frameworks (notably the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention, the 1992 UNECE Water Convention, the 1971 Ramsar Convention and the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions) **prohibiting the weaponization of water; establish binding mechanisms to protect environmental defenders**, ensure interoperability between formal basin committees and pre-existing customary or Indigenous governance structures that span state boundaries, and **prioritize water as a human right and instrument for peace** in fragile contexts.

Investments for water

Decentralize global water finance toward direct grant and concessional funding for local governments, community organizations, and Indigenous peoples; **enforce full lifecycle-cost accounting** (covering not only construction, but also operation, maintenance, and renewal over the infrastructure's full lifespan) to sustain rural and humanitarian WASH services, anchored in domestic public budgets and subject to strict human rights safeguards; **evaluate and improve "bankability" criteria and financing procedures** to bridge the gap between international policy commitments and administrative realities faced by local and smaller organizations

THE « BUTTERFLY EFFECT » ADVOCACY INITIATIVE

The Butterfly Effect, a coalition of 160 local and international NGOs/CSOs/CBOs, operated a broad consultation of its members, building on our previous positions. As events and declarations on water follow one another, it is essential to work in continuity. Civil society has a particular responsibility to ensure that the outcomes of the previous UN Conference on Water are considered in the 2026 one. This position paper presents the main political demands identified by our network for the attention of the international community.

The Butterfly Effect is coordinated by the International Secretariat for Water



The Butterfly Effect steering committee members



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