



Permanent Mission of the
International Union for Conservation of Nature
to the United Nations

High-Level Preparatory Meeting for the 2026 UN Water Conference in Dakar convened by the Government of Senegal

“Interactive dialogue - Water in multilateral processes”

Statement delivered by the Permanent Observer of IUCN to the UN, Dr Sofie Jaffe

Dakar, 27 January 2026

Excellencies, distinguished delegates

First of all, let me express our gratitude to the co-hosts United Arab Emirates and Senegal for your visionary leadership in this process, and particularly thank the people and government of Senegal for your warm hospitality. I would also like to congratulate Germany and Mexico on your appointment as co-chairs of this dialogue.

This dialogue matters because the global water crisis is, at its core, a crisis of governance - something we have reiterated for over 25 years. There is clear convergence on this point. Major publications—from the Global Commission on the Economics of Water to the recently launched Global Water Bankruptcy report—tell us the same story: our current, fragmented global water governance system is simply not fit for purpose.

Unlike climate change, land degradation and biodiversity loss, water has no dedicated multilateral governance regime—despite being the primary transmission channel through which these crises manifest. This absence creates a governance vacuum at the very heart of the global sustainability agenda

While we have several important Conventions on Water such as the UN Water Convention and the Ramsar Convention, there is no comprehensive global agreement on water that would cover the range of topics these dialogues discuss. That would cover all levels from the local to the global and all forms of water ecosystems. No regular intergovernmental process dedicated to it. No institutional architecture that systematically supports countries in managing their water resources. In fact, in the 80 years since the founding of the United Nations, there has been no negotiated global document focused specifically on water, and no universally adopted framework outlining shared principles for its management, use, and allocation.

And yet, there is reason for cautious optimism.

After almost 50 years without a UN Water Conference, we now have three mandated conferences within five years. We have a UN system-wide strategy on water and a UN Special Envoy. Water is increasingly integrated into other multilateral agendas, including the Rio Conventions. At COP27, water was recognized for the first time in a climate COP decision

text as central to adaptation—a momentum further advanced through the Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action launched at COP29.

The momentum is real—but momentum does not sustain itself.

If we are serious about addressing the gaps in global water governance, someone must step forward to translate momentum into structure. We must look beyond narrow, short-term interests and recognize the shared benefits of multilateral governance that reflects the interconnected nature of water systems themselves.

This governance system could be a Global Framework for Water, which could include regular intergovernmental meetings on water to maintain political attention; inclusive, multi-stakeholder mechanisms to support implementation, monitoring, and accountability; and dedicated finance aligned with commitments. This must be an intergovernmental process, led by Member States. Organizations such as IUCN stand ready to contribute scientific evidence, demonstrate the real-world consequences of governance gaps, and mobilize networks in support of this effort.

Some may ask whether this is the worst possible moment to attempt something new in the multilateral system. These are undoubtedly challenging times. But moments of upheaval are also moments of opportunity. And importantly, we do not need all the answers to begin. A pragmatic first step could be the establishment of an intergovernmental working group, mandated by the General Assembly, to explore options for strengthening global water governance and to present recommendations to the next UN Water Conference.

Allow me to conclude with a football analogy, fitting for a country of African champions. Our task now is to keep the ball in play at the 2026 Conference, pass it decisively to the right players, and build toward the moment when—finally—we can hit the goal. As Senegal knows well, one goal can be enough to win the game.

Thank you
