

A Global Framework for Water Governance and Action



Water insecurity is emerging as a systemic constraint on sustainable development, climate resilience, food security, ecosystem integrity and stability. While important legal, policy and institutional instruments already exist, the global water architecture remains fragmented and insufficiently equipped to sustain political attention, strengthen implementation, align finance and support accountability. The 2026 UN Water Conference offers Member States a timely opportunity to consider whether a global framework for water governance and action could help close this gap.

Recent progress such as the UN Water Conference, the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation, and the appointment of the Special Envoy on Water have helped elevate water politically. The opportunity now is for a member state-led process to build on the momentum and explore options for a voluntary, non-legally binding framework for water governance and action, with durable structures for coordination, implementation, review, and the mobilization of finance.

At the high level preparatory meeting for the UN Water Conference in Dakar in January 2026, IUCN called for an intergovernmental process to develop options for a global framework for water governance and action, with a view to agreeing a durable post-2030 architecture for water by 2029. The purpose of this brief is to propose options for consideration by UN Member States to take forward in the time leading up to and following the UN Water Conference.

A Global Framework for Water Governance and Action —a unifying, voluntary, and action-oriented architecture - will strengthen coherence across existing commitments, accelerate implementation, and mobilize political will, financial resources, and scientific cooperation. The overall aim is to ensure a sustainable, equitable and inclusive water-secure future for people and planet. A credible Framework will need to provide three things that are currently missing or insufficient: (i) regular political direction, (ii) a shared implementation and review architecture, and (iii) a finance mechanism aligned to agreed outcomes.

The proposed elements therefore include:

1. Regular intergovernmental meetings on water at the global level to keep political momentum and accelerate progress;
2. A shared set of outcomes and targets and multi-stakeholder mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, accountability and review of commitments and;
3. A dedicated finance pillar to mobilise and align public, multilateral and private finance behind agreed water outcomes, including support for implementation, capacity development, data systems, ecosystem protection and climate-resilient water governance in countries and basins most in need.

A Global Framework for Water Governance and Action can:

- **Articulate a shared vision and principles** that recognizes the stability of the hydrological cycle as a shared global concern and a foundation for sustainable development and peace, respecting national circumstances, and strengthen inclusive governance that empowers women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, and local communities.
- **Strengthen cooperation at all levels**, especially **transboundary water cooperation**, by supporting operational transboundary cooperation through implementation of existing agreements and conventions, basin and aquifer arrangements, joint monitoring, data sharing, and sustainable support for shared institutions
- **Advance integrated, ecosystem-based approaches** that protect and restore freshwater ecosystems, restore rivers and wetlands connectivity, safeguard environmental flows and the ecological integrity of freshwater systems, reduce water related risks, and promote nature-based solutions.
- **Promote sustainable water use by prioritizing demand management, efficiency improvements and circular water practices across sectors** and encourage the consideration of water footprints in production, consumption and trade systems to help reduce global water stress and promote more sustainable supply chains.
- **Enhance monitoring, data sharing, and accountability as well as scientific partnerships**, building on existing global indicators while improving transparency and comparability of progress.
- **Mobilize and align finance** for water security, including through innovative approaches and mechanisms that support countries and basins most in need, and catalyse investment in resilient, nature-positive solutions.
- **Promote coherence across multilateral processes**, including the Rio Conventions, the 2030 Agenda, and human rights instruments, ensuring water is fully integrated into global climate, biodiversity, desertification and development action, adding value without duplication and expansion.

A Global Framework will help preserve political visibility, monitoring continuity and implementation momentum for water beyond the 2030 Agenda, regardless of the eventual structure of a post-2030 development framework. It can be designed in such a way as to be complementary to the current 2030 Agenda and to its eventual successor, whether that is a rollover of the existing SDGs with updated targets reflecting progress made under other relevant international processes such as the Global Biodiversity Framework and the High Seas Treaty, or a new global agenda.

Any future water framework should be fully consistent with the UN Charter and existing international law, and implemented in accordance with national circumstances, capacities and priorities. It should not reopen existing legal instruments, but rather strengthen coherence, implementation, review and support across the current landscape.

Using experience and lessons from the development of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, a Global Framework for Water Governance and Action can include a set of outcomes, crosscutting principles and priority action areas, with actions at the global, regional and national level under each priority area. Examples of outcomes include:



Examples of crosscutting principles include:

- Participation of indigenous peoples and local communities
- Gender transformative approaches to water management, access and use
- The principles of equitable and reasonable utilization and avoidance of significant harm

A Framework will provide continuity, clearer mandates and stronger political backing for the emerging institutional architecture around water, including the Special Envoy, UN-Water coordination functions, and scientific cooperation mechanisms. As with other similar frameworks, implementation will be lead by member states, with institutional support developed upon existing UN-Water and related coordination capacities.

A Framework can mandate regular UN Water Conferences, for example every four years, with the first taking place in 2031. In addition to any regular UN Water Conference, high-level review meetings held every two years can provide an interim point for review and momentum for member states.

These interim meetings will focus on strengthen implementation support, capacity, data systems, and access to finance; for water-stressed middle-income countries to elevate water security in economic planning; for SIDS and climate-vulnerable states to connect water more directly to resilience and adaptation; for upstream and downstream basin states to strengthen practical cooperation without imposing new legal obligations; and for donors and investors to improve coherence and accountability across fragmented water finance.

The Sendai Framework is a good example to lean on in the process as it offers a model for a non-treaty, politically endorsed framework with outcomes, principles, review cycles and shared responsibilities across levels. It captures both the global and national level, and deals with a matter that is crosscutting and a topic that links closely to all of the SDGs. Sendai was developed following a multi-year consultation process that included wide stakeholder consultations. ^[1]



Freshwater ecosystems host a disproportionate share of global biodiversity yet are experiencing some of the fastest rates of species decline globally. The loss of wetlands, forests and healthy soils reduces water storage, filtration and flow regulation functions, and undermines the ecological processes that sustain the hydrological cycle increasing vulnerability to floods, droughts and water scarcity. Protecting and restoring these ecosystems is essential to maintaining a stable and resilient hydrological cycle. It is therefore important to recognize the stability of the global hydrological cycle as a critical earth system function, and support actions that maintain water use within safe ecological limits at basin scales.

Throughout the 20th century, the number of international water treaties surged in response to the increasing demand for water due to population growth and industrialization. Notable treaties emerged, starting with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, adopted in 1971, dedicated to the conservation and “wise use” of wetlands through local, regional, and international actions. The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (UNECE convention), was signed shortly before the Rio Conference and entered into force in 1996, and promotes cooperation on shared water resources, ensures equitable use, and protects aquatic ecosystems¹. The Convention initially focused on Europe but has had a global focus since 2013. The United Nations Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses was adopted in 1997 and entered into force in 2014. The 1997 Convention seeks to provide a framework for resolving disputes related to shared water systems. These treaties articulate principles such as “equitable and reasonable utilization,” “obligation not to cause significant harm,” and “protection of ecosystems.”²

These treaties govern relations between nation States, not the relationship between people, ecosystems and water within States. Human rights law guarantees access to water, environmental law protects aquatic ecosystems, and international water law allocates water between countries - yet no framework integrates these three dimensions into a coherent governance system. This fragmentation is a major structural weakness of global water governance, leading to fragmentation, weak continuity, weak accountability, and poor linkage to implementation.

There have been several calls for a formal global governance framework for water, including the report of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water, which stated that “the institution of a just, global water-governance mechanism at the UN would incorporate a process of inclusive, multi-stakeholder dialogue and an agenda for collective action to accelerate impact. The ultimate ambition is to negotiate a global water pact with clear and measurable goals to stabilise the hydrological cycle and recognising it as a global public good”³ What is needed now is an effort by Member States to jointly articulate what the governance framework would look like, and reach a shared understanding of what is meant with water governance.



IUCN's comparative advantage lies in its role as a neutral convenor across government and civil society, its basin-level experience, its multilevel governance approach, its benefit-sharing practice, and its ability to connect policy to implementation. IUCN convenes governments and civil society in politically sensitive water contexts, supports basin-level institutional design and implementation, connects freshwater ecosystem protection to governance and finance, and brings tested practice through BRIDGE, CREATES, the Freshwater Challenge, and other related initiatives.