

Technical Brief

Global Framework for Water Governance and Action

Context – Water within the UN System

The history of United Nations conferences on water reflects both the centrality of water to sustainable development and the persistent weakness of its global institutional architecture. The first UN Water Conference, held in Mar del Plata in 1977, was a landmark moment that produced the Mar del Plata Action Plan and established water as a matter of international policy concern. For decades afterwards, however, water has remained addressed mainly through fragmented sectoral and thematic processes rather than through a standing global intergovernmental framework. The UN 2023 Water Conference in New York, convened forty-six years later, marked a renewed political recognition that water is fundamental to development, climate resilience, public health, food systems, biodiversity, and peace. The 2026 and 2028 UN Water Conferences now provide a rare opportunity not only to sustain that momentum, but to consider what more durable architecture may be needed to support implementation, accountability, and cooperation on water beyond 2030.

**New
Institutional
architecture
is needed**

On the 19th of March, IUCN issued a brief outlining a proposal for a Global Framework for Water Governance and Action. This technical brief is designed to complement the proposal by providing more substantial detail on some of the core issues that need to be addressed in order for agreement on a framework to be reached: institutional architecture, financing mechanism, alignment with other frameworks and private sector engagement.

The Framework will guide water action for the next decades, and as such the institutional architecture to support it should be developed so that it is fit for purpose for 2050 – not guided by institutional practices from the past.

There are several different options for the institutional structure:

Option 1

UN based secretariat with regional technical support centres

This option would entail a small secretariat at the global level that would provide organizational support for the regular water conferences, operational support for the dedicated finance coordination mechanism and oversee the accountability and monitoring mechanism. This function could be fulfilled by a dedicated department in the UN secretariat, for instance by the creation of a Water Action Team in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. The secretariat would be headed by an Assistant Secretary-General to provide political direction and influence for the agenda, reporting directly to the UN Secretary-General. The ASG for Water would replace the current Special Envoy for water.

The work of the secretariat would make use of the latest available technology and many functions provided by similar entities and the UN secretariat that are very time consuming would be automated. As the team would be within the UN secretariat its establishment would require approval by the fifth committee of the UN General Assembly.

Regional Technical Support Centres for Water would act as **the operational backbone** of a global water framework. Countries and organizations would be asked to bid for hosting these centres, and host countries would be expected to cover the operational costs of the centres or fundraise for this cost.

The core functions of the regional support centres would include:

1. Strengthen Implementation of Global Water Commitments

- Translate global norms (e.g., SDG 6, human right to water, climate and biodiversity commitments) into regionally relevant guidance.
- Support countries in aligning national policies with global frameworks, including reporting and follow up mechanisms.
- Provide technical backstopping for regional organisations (e.g., river basin organisations, RECs, UN regional commissions).

2. Data, Monitoring, and Early Warning

- Consolidate regional hydrological, ecological, and socio economic data to support shared baselines.
- Strengthen monitoring systems for water quality, quantity, ecosystem health, and climate risks.
- Facilitate interoperable data platforms and promote open, gender disaggregated, and Indigenous inclusive data practices.
- Support early warning systems for floods, droughts, and pollution events, building on WMO and UNEP frameworks.

3. Support Transboundary and International Water Cooperation

- Provide neutral technical expertise to basin states on legal, institutional, and hydrological issues, including on groundwater.
- Facilitate joint assessments, scenario modelling, and benefit sharing analyses.
- Offer mediation support and confidence building tools for politically sensitive basins.
- Strengthen the capacity of river basin organisations and help countries accede to or implement water conventions.

4. Scientific and Technical Cooperation

- Serve as regional hubs connecting universities, research institutes, and practitioners.
- Translate cutting edge science (climate modelling, nature based solutions, groundwater mapping, ecosystem valuation) into actionable policy tools.
- Coordinate regional research agendas aligned with global priorities.
- Support innovation uptake, including digital water technologies and climate resilient infrastructure.

5. Inclusive Governance and Capacity Development

- Provide training on integrated water resources management (IWRM), rights based approaches, and ecosystem governance.
- Strengthen participation of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities in water decision making.
- Support countries in developing gender responsive water policies and leadership pipelines.
- Facilitate peer to peer exchanges and communities of practice.

6. Ecosystem-Based Approaches and Nature-Based Solutions

- Provide technical guidance on watershed restoration, wetlands management, and ecosystem protection.
- Support countries in integrating NbS into climate adaptation plans, NDCs, NBSAPs, and land use planning.
- Develop regional standards, methodologies, and financing models for NbS.

7. Financing and Project Preparation Support

- Help countries and basin organisations prepare bankable proposals for climate, biodiversity, and water funds.
- Provide guidance on blended finance, green bonds, and ecosystem service valuation.
- Support regional pipelines of investment-ready projects, especially for vulnerable countries.

Option 2

UN Water Program

Option two would be to transform the current UN Water into a UN Water Program, which can be created by a UN General Assembly resolution (not a treaty). The program would not be a separate international organization; it is part of the UN Secretariat, and all UN Member States participate by default. The UN Water program would have a normative, convening, and coordinating mandate, which would be guided by relevant UN GA resolutions and by the negotiated outcomes of the regular UN water conferences. The Program would be headed by an Executive Director who would have the seniority needed to provide political visibility for water. As such the mandate of the current Special Envoy would be merged into the role of the ED for the UN Water Program. A decentralized structure with regional support centres as outlined in option 1 can be applied to a UN Water program as well.

The main difference between a UN Water program and a secretariat hosting as a department of the UN secretariat is that the latter is funded by regular contributions to the UN budget and the former is funded by voluntary contributions, and as such is largely ‘project driven’.

Option 3

International Water Organization

The option to transform UN Water into an international organization is a recurrent theme in discussions on strengthening the global governance of water, with proposals emphasizing that a dedicated international water organization under the United Nations could provide more holistic support for countries in the implementation of their commitments on water.

A comprehensive and well functioning financing pillar will be crucial to the successful implementation of a Framework. The financing pillar needs to reflect the deep shifts that are currently taking place in the development financing landscape, and as such need to provide innovative and forward-looking options. It also needs to be aligned with the Sevilla Commitment and the Sevilla Platform for Action. Therefore, a separate technical brief on financing will be published by July to elaborate options further.	Finance
One of the key questions is how a Framework aligns with SDG6 and other international frameworks and agreements, such as the Global Biodiversity Framework. The proposed Global Framework would build upon existing commitments and the current SDG6 and provide a more comprehensive and harmonized approach to water action at the global and national level. It would address some of the current gaps in SDG6 and the 2030 agenda such as insufficient capturing of the quality of water governance, building technical and human resource capacity, localization and integration with climate resilience, IWRM, and humanitarian systems. SDG 6 is missing the deeper systemic elements—governance, finance, equity, climate resilience, and ecosystem health—that determine whether countries can actually deliver universal water and sanitation. The SDGs were formulated on the legacy of the Millenium Development Goals with a primary focus on basic services and as such the focus of SDG6 is on service delivery – not on comprehensive water governance. As such issues related to water allocation, water allocation, hydrological connectivity and environmental flows and the political economy of water are not captured adequately. On target 6.5 several calls have been made over the years for a more explicit focus on groundwater and the need to address the more comprehensively water cooperation within countries as well as the need to capture quality of cooperation, dispute resolution, or climate related risks to shared basins. With regards to water-related ecosystems there is a need to update target 6.6 to reflect the Global Biodiversity Framework, there freshwater is embedded across the framework—especially in Targets 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 19, 21, and 22. Target 6.6. currently does not capture the conservation aspect (target 3 of GBF) and does not fully address ecosystem health and function, the drivers of degradation and restoration needs and outcomes. The current wording of target 6.6 also does not mention the cryosphere. The current 2030 Agenda framework also does not adequately address the interactions with water and agriculture, energy and urban development and the need for coherent national water strategies and integrated planning at the national level, as well as the need for water and sanitation system to become resilience to climate change.	Alignment with SDG6 and other international agreements

Finally, the main issue that is lacking from the 2030 Agenda in general, and SDG6 in particular, is adequate accountability for implementation. Current SDG6 global progress reports tracks outcomes but does not track commitments and the gap between commitments and implementation, neither does it include a review of the quality of national plans or an assessment of the effectiveness of investments.

As the process to develop the SDGs beyond 2030 will begin in earnest in September 2027 with the SDG Summit the development of the Water Framework would be complementary to that process. The current 2030 Agenda refers to several supporting agreements and Frameworks, such as the Sendai Framework, the Global Compact on Migration and the Paris Agreement. As such there is already existing precedence on alignment of the SDGs with complementary frameworks and agreements.

A global water framework would create the coherence, predictability, and accountability that companies currently lack to build an enabling environment, including or the scaling up of technical solutions. Today, private sector engagement is voluntary, inconsistent, and often disconnected from basin level realities. A global framework could change that by establishing a shared architecture for action by creating a unified set of global expectations for corporate water stewardship,

Right now, companies face dozens of overlapping standards, inconsistent reporting requirements, and no alignment between climate, biodiversity, and water disclosure.

A global framework could establish minimum global norms for water use, pollution, and ecosystem impacts, harmonize corporate water disclosure, align with the GBF, Paris Agreement, and SDG 6, and provide a single reference point for investors and regulators. This reduces transaction costs and increases compliance. The framework could also support a shift from voluntary stewardship to basin level accountability. Most corporate water action is site based. But water risk is basin based. A global framework could require or incentivize basin level water risk assessments, participation in basin governance bodies, contributions to environmental flows, and alignment with national IWRM plans. This moves companies from “doing good on their own site” to “reducing pressure on shared freshwater systems.”

Most importantly, a Framework can mobilize private finance for freshwater restoration and resilience and unlock investment by defining bankable nature based solutions for water, standardizing metrics for freshwater restoration, creating a global pipeline of water positive projects, and establishing blended finance mechanisms. This would make it easier for companies to invest in wetlands, floodplains, aquifer recharge, and watershed protection.

The Framework would also create incentives for innovation and technology transfer through establishing innovation challenges, supporting digital water technologies, and encouraging public–private partnerships for monitoring and early warning.

The below is an indicative timeline: it follows the broad procedural sequence used for comparable UN-led frameworks (Sendai, the SDGs, and the BBNJ Agreement) – namely an options/elements paper, a mandating resolution, appointment of co-facilitators, staged stakeholder and Member State consultations, two or more PrepComs, a high-level negotiating and adoption meeting, formal GA adoption, and a launch/review cycle thereafter. Each stage is elaborated below, with an indication of the procedural steps and actors typically involved.

●	DECEMBER 2026	UN Water Conference invites options paper and Member State consultation: the Conference outcome document – the summary to be prepared by the co-hosts which would need to explicitly state that the conference should result in an intergovernmental process, with options to be considered for the framework of such a process by the General Assembly.
●	JANUARY 2027	Tabling of the follow-up resolution from the conference by the co-hosts which would mandate the start of the intergovernmental process, the 2029 high level meeting and the 2031 UN Water Conference. The resolutions need to explicitly invite the Secretary-General or UN-Water to prepare an options paper and would task the President of the General Assembly or ECOSOC with convening informal Member State briefings on the options paper in the third quarter of 2027.
●	APRIL 2027	Resolution adopted: Following several rounds of informal negotiations among Member States (typically two to three reading sessions to resolve bracketed/contested language), the resolution would be adopted by consensus or vote in plenary.
●	MAY 2027	Appointment of co-facilitators for the process: the President of the General Assembly (or ECOSOC President, depending on the modality chosen in the resolution) would appoint two co-facilitators, typically one from a developed and one from a developing country, to steer consultations, draft the options paper with support of UN Water and zero draft, and report periodically to the wider membership.

JUNE -

DECEMBER 2026

Global stakeholder consultations: co-facilitators would convene a series of thematic and regional consultations (drawing on the Sendai model) covering, at minimum, each UN regional group, civil society and Indigenous Peoples' organizations, the scientific and technical community, the private sector and financial institutions, and basin/transboundary water bodies; submissions and consultation summaries would feed into the options paper to be issued ahead of PrepCom 1.

DECEMBER 2027

PrepCom 1: the first Preparatory Committee session, open to all Member States and accredited observers and stakeholders, would consider the options paper, agree its modalities of work (including provisions for stakeholder participation in subsequent sessions), and provide initial political guidance on the scope and structure of the Framework, without yet negotiating text line by line.

JANUARY -

APRIL 2028

Co-facilitators issue a zero draft of the Framework, incorporating PrepCom 1 guidance and consultation input, circulated to Member States for written comments ahead of the 2028 UN Water Conference.

MAY 2028

High level consultations during the 2028 UN Water Conference: convened on the margins of the Conference, these would allow ministers and heads of delegation to give political direction on the zero draft's most contested elements (likely finance commitments and the legal status/non-binding nature of the Framework) ahead of the more technical PrepCom 2.

DECEMBER 2028

PrepCom2: the second Preparatory Committee would undertake a full first reading of the revised draft text, paragraph by paragraph, narrowing brackets and contested language, and mandate the co-facilitators to prepare a near-final text (a "pre-final" or "advance unedited" version) for the April 2029 high-level meeting.

- APRIL 2029

High level meeting to finalize the negotiations of the Framework and adopt the outcome: a multi-day meeting, likely held under the auspices of the General Assembly or as a dedicated UN conference, would convene at ministerial or head-of-state/government level; any remaining brackets would be resolved through a final round of informal-informals or a Friends-of-the-Chair group, with the text gavelled through by the meeting's President once consensus is reached.
- JUNE 2029

Adoption by the UN General Assembly: formal endorsement of the outcome via a General Assembly resolution "welcoming and adopting" the Framework, mandating the institutional structure set up to support implementation, and requesting the Secretary-General to report periodically on progress.
- 2031

First conference to galvanize political will and mobilize resources for implementation: this would be the first regular Conference mandated under the Framework itself (held on the four-year cycle proposed above), and would likely include a pledging session or finance roundtable, presentation of early national commitments or action plans, and agreement on indicators for the first reporting cycle.
- 2035

First review conference: this would assess progress against the outcomes and targets agreed in 2029, drawing on national and regional reporting coordinated by UN-Water, and would be preceded – consistent with the two-year interim review cycle described above – by high-level review meetings in 2033 to sustain momentum between the 2031 and 2035 Conferences.

Several procedural questions will need to be resolved early in this process, ideally in the 2026 Conference outcome or the January 2027 resolution itself, as they shape everything that follows: (i) the institutional home for the process – whether it is anchored in the General Assembly (via the Second Committee), in ECOSOC, or run as a standalone conference process similar to BBNJ; (ii) the modalities for stakeholder participation, including whether civil society, Indigenous Peoples’ organizations and the private sector receive accreditation rights comparable to those in the Sendai or SDG processes; (iii) the rules of procedure for decision-making, in particular whether the Framework is adopted by consensus only or allows for a vote if consensus cannot be reached; and (iv) the relationship between the new Framework and existing mandates (the Special Envoy on Water, UN-Water, and the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation), to avoid duplication or competing secretariats. IUCN’s suggested entry points for engagement are the 2026 Conference itself, the global stakeholder consultations in 2027, and both PrepComs, where technical input on ecosystem-based outcomes and indicators will be most needed.