



# Monitoring Water and Sanitation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

An executive briefing

## From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, heads of state from all around the world gathered in New York to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an ambitious “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity,” aiming to do nothing less than “transform our world”. Building on the UN Millennium Declaration and its eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015), the 2030 Agenda expands the earlier focus on poverty reduction to now cover all aspects of sustainable development in all countries of the world to ensure that no one is left behind.

The MDGs provided a framework for governments to develop policies and programmes focusing on ending poverty and improving the lives of the poor, and for civil society to hold governments into account. Although the MDGs resulted in great progress in many areas, the narrow scope failed to consider the root causes of poverty, overlooking both human rights and the holistic nature of sustainable development including economic development. Further, many countries met their targets by investing in “low hanging fruits”, leaving the poorest and most disadvantaged forgotten.

The work with defining a successor to the MDG framework, including the formulation of goals, targets and indicators was formally initiated at the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012, mandating the creation of a Member State-led Open Working Group of the United Nations General Assembly (OWG) in January 2013. The process included an unprecedented consultation process, where people around the world were asked about what future they want, including thematic and national consultations and an online survey where everyone could participate. In July 2014, the OWG presented its proposal of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stretching across the three dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental). During 2015 there were monthly intergovernmental negotiations of the proposal, its adoption and

implementation, culminating at the UN Summit in September in New York with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Among the SDGs there is a dedicated goal on water and sanitation (SDG 6) that sets out to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”.

**With the expiration of the MDGs in 2015, 9 out of 10 people worldwide had access to an improved drinking water source (however, not necessarily safe to drink) but 2.4 billion people were still using unimproved sanitation facilities (of which a third practiced open defecation); large disparities between urban and rural populations prevailed. Source: The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2015**



Water is life, instrumental for sustainable social, economic and environmental development (Photo credit: Jojo Nicdao, Creative Commons Attribution)

# Why a SDG on water and sanitation?



Between 1990 and 2015, 2.6 billion people gained access to an improved water source – but is the water safe to drink and available when needed? (Photo credit: VAST Bhutan, Creative Commons Attribution)

Water and sanitation are at the very core of sustainable development. Safe drinking water and adequate sanitation and hygiene are pillars of human health and well-being, reducing the burden of disease and thus enabling children to attend school, and women and men to participate in economic and political life. Water is needed for food, energy and industrial production, directly contributing to economic growth and the reduction of poverty; however, uses are highly inter-connected and potentially conflicting. These various uses also generate wastewater that may cause pollution if not properly managed, threatening both human and environmental health.

Water is also needed by ecosystems, which in turn are essential to safeguard the provision of water services to society over time, improving overall resilience to climatic variability and environmental change. Climate change is often reflected in shifts in water availability, increasing water scarcity in some areas and flooding in others, with severe impacts on human health, well-being and the economy. Management of water is a key factor in managing risks related to famine, epidemics, migration, inequalities, political instability and natural disasters.

Cutting across social and economic sectors, water can be instrumental for the implementation of integrated solutions. However, water resources are commonly developed and managed by different parts of the government and within the different sectors with little coordination. Inherent to this sectoral approach is the problem of coherence, where policies and decision-making in one sector could contradict or duplicate policies and decisionmaking in another sector. The management of water resources according to administrative borders, commonly cutting across the natural water catchments, results in further fragmentation, especially in the case of transboundary basins.

For sustainability over time, it is essential to look at the water cycle in its entirety, including all uses and users. Countries need to move away from the sectoral development and management of water resources, in favour of a more integrated approach that can balance different needs in an equitable manner. And this is exactly what SDG 6 seeks to do by bringing together all the main aspects related to freshwater in the context of sustainable development. This is a first step towards addressing sector and regional fragmentation and enabling coherent and sustainable management, making SDG 6 a major step forward towards a sustainable water future.

**Worldwide, freshwater resources are abundant, with only 9 per cent withdrawn by society. However, available resources are unevenly distributed across regions and within countries and in 2011, 41 countries experienced water stress, of which 10 withdrew more than 100 % of their renewable resources. Water scarcity – both physical as well as economic scarcity due to poor management – is currently affecting more than 40 % of the global population. Source: The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2015**

# Translating global ambition to national action

Country ownership is clearly highlighted across the 2030 Agenda – for implementation, for the monitoring of progress, for the process for follow-up and review – and inspired by the global ambition of the SDG targets, countries need to set their own targets that take national circumstances into account. A set of global indicators will be used to report on progress towards the targets, drawn primarily from national official data sources. These are to be complemented by additional indicators required for the purpose of national, regional and thematic use and reporting.

For SDG 6, this means that countries need to set their own targets on, for example, extending access to safe drinking water, increasing wastewater treatment and improving water-use efficiency. For some countries it may be useful to add a national indicator on time spent collecting water, and for others to add a national indicator on the rate of desertification, or the proportion of water reuse.

**“Targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each Government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances.”**

**“Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be ... voluntary and country-led ... the outcome from national level processes will be the foundation for reviews at the regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.”**

**“The Goals and targets will be followed up and reviewed using a set of global indicators.”**

– 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

## What are the benefits of improved water and sanitation monitoring?

Credible water and sanitation data will underpin advocacy, stimulate political commitment and public and private investments, inform decision-making at all levels and trigger well-placed investment towards optimum health, environment and economic gains. By monitoring SDG 6 in its entirety, national level decision makers are empowered to guide investment where it is most needed. Data thus provide numerous social, economic, and environmental benefits in both public and private sectors, from the local level for management purposes, up to the global level for tracking global trends.

To ensure high-quality, timely, reliable and disaggregated data, it is clear that the capacity of national statistical offices and data systems needs to be strengthened, and that especially developing countries need support in this regard. Fortunately, new technologies are rapidly improving our capacity to collect, store, analyse, report and share data, and at the same time are cutting the costs of doing so. There are also significant opportunities for combining various monitoring methods and data sources, including direct measurements, surveys, remote sensing, estimates and literature reviews.



The use of new monitoring technologies can rapidly improve our knowledge about our water resources, and guide investment to where it is most needed (Photo credit: Malik Naumann, Creative Commons Attribution)



Water is life, instrumental for sustainable social, economic and environmental development (Photo credit: Pingz Man, Creative Commons Attribution)

# Integrated Monitoring of SDG 6

At present, there are several global initiatives that are monitoring different aspects of the water and sanitation goal, but a coherent framework is missing. The Integrated Monitoring of Water and Sanitation related SDG targets (GEMI) initiative is being developed in order to integrate and expand existing efforts, to ensure harmonised monitoring of the entire water cycle. GEMI is an inter-agency initiative comprising UNEP, UN-Habitat, UNICEF, FAO, UNESCO, WHO and WMO, operating under the umbrella of UN-Water.

Focusing on aspects related to water, wastewater and ecosystem resources, GEMI complements WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) and UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) efforts on drinking water and sanitation. Together, JMP, GEMI and GLAAS will be able to monitor global progress towards the entirety of SDG 6, building on national monitoring efforts.

## What is special about the Integrated Monitoring initiative?

Far from being prescriptive, the Integrated Monitoring initiative provides a platform for national governments to monitor progress towards SDG 6, building on national monitoring efforts and driven by the need for national planning, development and management of water resources. The initiative supports country-ownership of SDG monitoring and reporting, recognizing the importance of capacity building to ensure robust national monitoring mechanisms.

Based on the global indicator framework, the Integrated Monitoring initiative proposes a set of monitoring methodologies for SDG 6, which allows countries to begin monitoring efforts at a level in line with their national capacity and available resources (e.g. using Earth observations or qualitative estimations), and from there advance progressively (e.g. using direct field measurements). The methodologies also seek to promote harmonization and the use of similar standards and definitions, to facilitate the sharing and comparison of data both within

and across countries and over time. In many cases, improved national monitoring will open up new opportunities for regional reporting, e.g. in regard to transboundary aspects.

Much of the data to undertake effective monitoring is already available at national level, e.g. from administrative sources and from utilities. The Integrated Monitoring initiative will support countries to use this data and assist in national statistical offices' endorsement of such approaches. The Integrated Monitoring initiative will also seek to work together with other relevant national and international monitoring stakeholders present at the country level, to scale up efforts.

Detailed monitoring of all aspects of the water cycle and SDG 6 may not be of interest to all countries; water scarce countries have different priorities as compared to countries where poor ambient water quality is pressing. Prioritizing efforts and resources is essential in this regard.

## Learn more

About water and sanitation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: [www.unwater.org/sdgs/en/](http://www.unwater.org/sdgs/en/)  
About the GEMI monitoring initiative: [www.unwater.org/gemi/en/](http://www.unwater.org/gemi/en/)



**UN HABITAT**  
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

**unicef**



**Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations**



**World Health  
Organization**

