

Freshwater
Strategy 2017-2021

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«Protecting, managing and restoring freshwater in support of human well-being and sustainable development.»



Picture 1 — River in Punakha, Bhutan © UN Photo

— Summary

While facing numerous pressures and degradation, freshwater ecosystems play a central role for the health of economies and societies worldwide. Preserving and protecting the world's freshwater is a key role of the members of the United Nations (UN), in particular through their environmental agency, UN Environment.

Covering a key period where it will be crucial to tackle the world's freshwater issues to deal with threats such as increased pollution, urbanization, rising food and energy production, water-related disasters and displacement of people, this Freshwater Strategy provides actionable guidance for UN Environment to support countries' implementation of sustainable freshwater management practices globally. It is built on several concepts and pillars. Firstly, freshwater is essential to the environment as a whole and underpins all areas in which UN Environment works, including to effective ecosystem-based management (EBM) and ecosystem-based adaptation (EBA). Thus the Freshwater Strategy helps UN Environment deliver on its mandate, programmes of work and medium-term strategies. Secondly, support for the achievement of numerous freshwater-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development falls under UN Environment's mandate, with core targets specific to SDG 6 that include freshwater ecosystems, water quality and pollution, and integrated water resources management (IWRM). Achievement of these targets is essential for realizing the entirety of SDG 6 dedicated to water and sanitation,

in addition to other SDGs closely linked to freshwater such as those on water-related disasters, conflict and climate change, food and energy security and terrestrial and marine ecosystems, and peaceful and inclusive societies, among many others.

More specifically, the strategy describes UN Environment's planned levels of engagement, which include providing global leadership, contributing to topics of immediate and pressing concern, and actively following other closely related processes. In practical terms, the strategy will be operationalized through a combination of ongoing and new initiatives in support of Member States. A range of key work areas are defined with example activities including direct provision of expertise, development and dissemination of tools and techniques, and a range of awareness raising and knowledge sharing efforts. Many activities will be carried out through existing and new partnerships drawn from the United Nations system, and other expert organizations including national government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector.

The duration of this Freshwater Strategy, 2017-2021, covers a crucial time for kickstarting this implementation¹. The Freshwater Strategy is supported by UN Environment's comparative advantage as a trusted, impartial convening organization, and for its role in knowledge and science-based environmental management and policy. UN Environment's approach to strategic partnering internally and externally contributes to the structure of this strategy.



This document describes UN Environment’s five-year Freshwater Strategy from 2017 to 2021. As a living document, it is intended to guide work related to freshwater across UN Environment’s divisions, sub-programmes and regional offices, as well as interactions with governments and partners at national, regional and global levels. The Freshwater Strategy supports the implementation of UN Environment’s Medium-Term Strategy and Programme of Work adopted by universal United Nations (UN) membership through the UN Environment Assembly. Coming at a critical time for freshwater in general, and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular, this strategy aims to unlock the potential of integrated collaboration and spur leadership on freshwater issues globally.

1.1 — The Importance of Freshwater

Freshwater plays a fundamental role in support of the environment, society and the economy. Ecosystems such as wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes are indispensable for life on our planet and are vital for directly ensuring a range of benefits and services such as drinking water, water for food and industry including energy, habitats for aquatic life, and natural solutions for water purification and buffering floods and bridging drought periods, among many others. Managed well to address competing demands and ensure their resilience in the face of climate change, disasters and conflict, freshwater ecosystems contribute to mitigating risks, and promoting stability and trust-building measures. As such, they are essential for sustainable development, peace and security, and human well-being. SDG 6, “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”², represents one of the core elements supporting sustainable development as addressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, cutting across all of its facets (Figure 1). Beyond SDG 6, numerous inextricable interlinkages exist between water and the other SDGs, both in a reinforcing or a trade-off relationship³. ►

Introduction



Figure 1 — UN Environment Freshwater Strategy and SDG Interlinkages



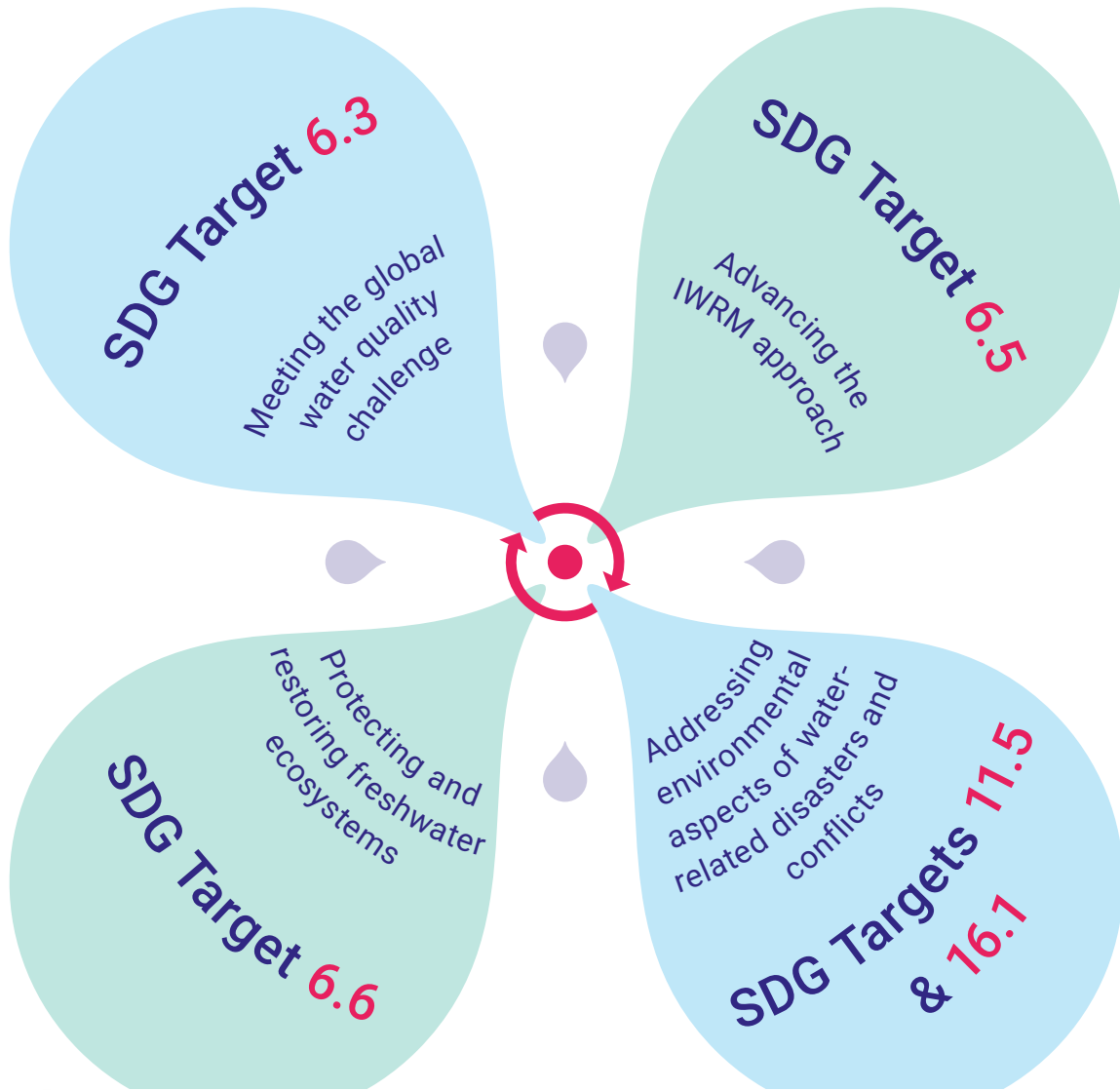
1.2 — UN Environment's Comparative Advantage

UN Environment is uniquely positioned to contribute to the global freshwater agenda from several perspectives. UN Environment:

- Is the leading authority that sets the global environmental agenda and serves as an authoritative advocate for global environmental stewardship.
- Is a well-established, trusted and impartial convening organization for numerous environmental issues, including sustainable freshwater management. This is supported by UN Environment's global mandate and reputation for science-based knowledge on global environmental management, its capacity for driving productive environmental policy dialogue, and as the home for the management and oversight of numerous global environmental conventions.
- Informs and guides the implementation of international environmental agreements, many of which are also administered by UN Environment, which bears great significance for the sustainability of freshwater resources across the globe. In hosting and administering the Secretariats of major multilateral environmental agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, and the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, UN Environment has gained a unique insight into: (i) the challenges of implementing global treaties at the national and regional levels; (ii) the importance of identifying synergies and inter-linkages between them; and, (iii) the institutional aspects associated with the governance of these global agreements including technical assistance and capacity building as well as monitoring.
- Works through partnerships with governments and hundreds of other organizations and agencies to implement the global environment agenda.
- Is known for its integrated approach to environmental management, including Ecosystem-based Management (EBM) and Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EBA). Furthermore, UN Environment promotes the application of EBA approaches in conflict-affected and weak governance contexts as a means to promote cooperation between divided groups.

At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 (Rio+20), the role of UN Environment was strengthened, with Member States asking for the establishment of universal membership by the General Assembly⁶. Member States simultaneously confirmed UN Environment as the programme "that promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system"⁷.

Building on UN Environment's comparative advantages, this Freshwater Strategy contributes to the realization of its Programmes of Work and Medium-term Strategies⁸, decided by Governments through universal membership in the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA). •



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