



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 implementation<sup>1</sup>. 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"<sup>2</sup>, 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 relationship<sup>3</sup>. ►





**Figure 1**  
Freshwater Strategy  
SDG Interlinkages

**Figure 1 SDG interlinkages**

To retain their full functionality, freshwater ecosystems rely on sufficient water quantity and water quality, both of which are increasingly under threat<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the growing demand that freshwater supplies face for purposes such as agriculture, energy and human settlements, freshwater ecosystems are also bearing the brunt of the impacts of human activities such as pollution, infrastructure development, deforestation and resource extraction. Competition among uses and users of freshwater exacerbates these challenges and calls for increased governance of water resources. Degradation of freshwater ecosystems, and competition for scarce water resources, can be the causes of conflict, displacement and migration. Furthermore, the effects of climate change are altering the hydrological cycle, resulting in more frequent and severe extreme events and disasters such as drought and floods<sup>5</sup>.

Effective freshwater management supports socioeconomic development as well as peace and security between and within countries where water resources are shared and freshwater ecosystems are threatened. Holistic, integrated and sustainable freshwater management also serves to eradicate poverty, promote human health, food and energy production, and provide more resilient and sustainable livelihood conditions in particular for vulnerable groups.

**1.2 — UN Environment’s Comparative Advantage**

UN Environment is uniquely positioned to drive the global freshwater strategy 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 drive 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 Assembly<sup>6</sup>. 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”<sup>7</sup>.

Building on UN Environment’s comparative advantages, this Freshwater Strategy contributes to the realization of its Programmes of Work and Medium-term Strategies<sup>8</sup>, decided by Governments through universal membership in the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA). •

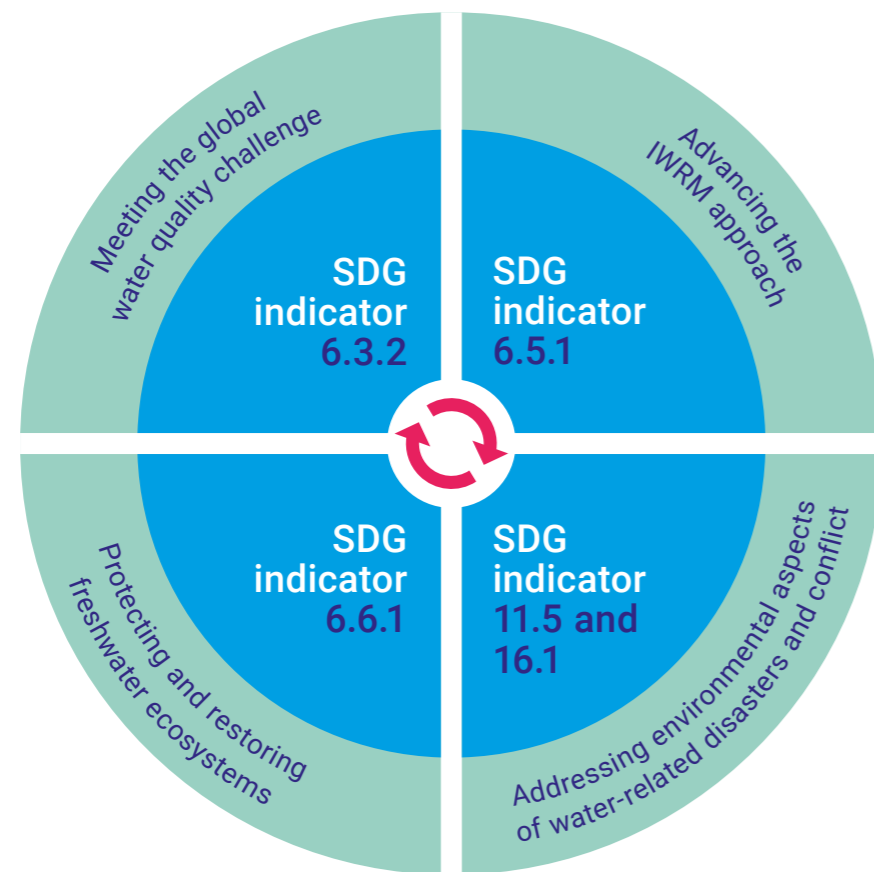


Figure 2

Core priorities of UN Environment  
Freshwater Strategy

## 2.1 — Mandate and objectives

The Freshwater Strategy contributes to UN Environment's mandate as the "leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment"<sup>9</sup>.

This mandate is operationalized through the UN Environment Medium-term Strategy 2014-2017, the Medium-term Strategy 2018-2020 (UNEA Resolution 2/20)<sup>10</sup>, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>11</sup>. Work towards realizing this mandate through the lens of freshwater will be supported by the following objectives and means:

- Deliver value through creating and sustaining a specific sense of purpose for freshwater conservation, protection and use globally across UN Environment and among its partners.
- Foster collaboration and align efforts of governments, UN agencies, partners, and other stakeholders to deliver specific freshwater management objectives and goals, including through effective convening and communication at all levels.
- Maximize the capacity for effective freshwater management among all stakeholders at local, regional and global levels, including building partner capacity.
- Deliver ongoing, recognized value towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals related to freshwater, including monitoring progress.

## 2.2 — Strategic Priorities and Levels of Engagement

In support of countries, UN Environment operates globally and regionally at the interface of the environment, water and development. Environmental goals and targets, including those related to freshwater, exist in an interlinked system of objectives, stakeholders, governments, societal dynamics, and other factors. The UN Environment Freshwater Strategy is positioned within this interlinked web of factors through a specific logic that maximizes efforts on core focus areas,

and impacts on other relevant areas within the overall scope of water management (see Figure 3). The Freshwater Strategy specifies three levels of engagement where UN Environment will do the following:

**Level 1 Engagement: Provide global leadership on topics core to UN Environment's mandate.** UN Environment will build on decades of experience and use its mandate from UN Member States to continue to drive the agenda for sustainable freshwater ecosystem management in the context of sustainable development. Along these lines, UN Environment will provide global leadership in four strategic areas (see Figure 2):

- Meeting the global water quality challenge (SDG target 6.3): The importance of reversing water quality degradation in the world's freshwater systems is recognized by governments, businesses and communities and steps are taken to improve ambient freshwater quality and reduce the impact of discharge of untreated wastewater into water bodies;
- Protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems (SDG target 6.6): Services provided by ecosystems are recognized and valued as part of sustainable development and the benefits are shared equitably;
- Advancing the Integrated Water Resources Management approach (SDG target 6.5): Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) underpins the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximise economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems<sup>12</sup>; and
- Promoting resilience and addressing the environmental aspects of water-related disasters and conflict (SDG targets 11.5 and 16.1): The capability to mitigate and adapt to current and future water-related hazards and risks facing ecosystem functions and human communities is strengthened and embedded into existing environmental planning and management systems. ►

# UN Environment's Freshwater Strategy

**Level 2 Engagement: Contribute to topics of immediate and pressing concern.** UN-Environment will leverage its expertise and networks to work with partners at all levels, from global to local, to contribute to the understanding and resolution of pressing freshwater issues:

At the water/development interface, productive uses of water and transboundary water management:

- Promote water use efficiency in agriculture and industries
- Advocate that environmental flow requirements are quantified and included when considering sustainable water withdrawals
- Support transboundary basin-wide approaches to environmental assessment and management

At the environment/development interface, source-to-sea linkages and natural infrastructure:

- Provide advice on the reduction of marine pollution from land-based sources
- Support a focus on deltas as hot-spot interfaces between rivers and the sea
- Promote the use of nature based solutions (natural infrastructure) to water related problems (such as flood protection, waste water purification, water storage)

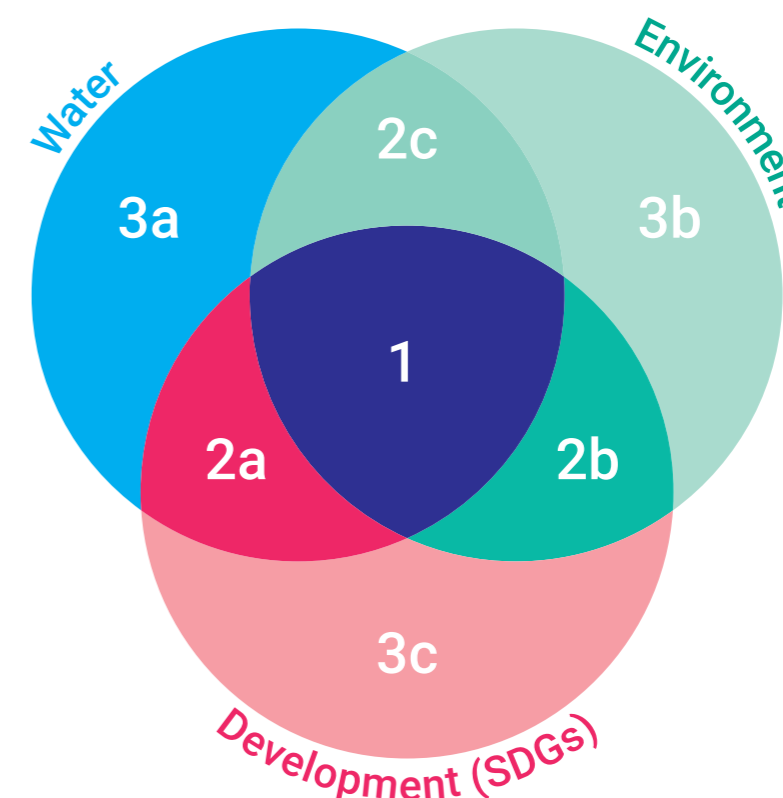
At the water/environment interface, water influenced by a changing climate, aquatic biodiversity, and land-water interactions:

- Promote ecosystem approaches to understand and project climate change impacts on the hydrological cycle
- Support the understanding of the importance of healthy aquatic ecosystems for biodiversity and ecosystem services
- Support integrated assessments of land use and water resources, including changes, drivers and response options

**Level 3 Engagement: Actively follow other closely related processes.** UN Environment, as a global organization, has a mandate to help countries develop, implement and report on a number of the "environmental" freshwater indicators in SDG 6. Beyond that, as many of the other SDGs relate closely to freshwater, UN Environment will continue to provide input to freshwater aspects as they relate to other areas of sustainable development, such as food and energy production.

UN Environment will actively follow these and other issues related to regional and global agendas related to water, environment and sustainable development. At this level of engagement, UN Environment will keep informed and abreast of developments in these areas, through contribution to expert groups and other processes, providing an environmental perspective / input as needed to those who are leading these processes.

Figure 3 illustrates how these priorities and levels of engagement intersect with each other and form the rationale for UN Environment's priority areas of work. ●



**Figure 3**

UN Environment Core Areas of Work in the Freshwater Strategy 2017-2021

UN Environment leads on: <span style="float: right;">1</span>	UN Environment contributions to: <span style="float: right;">2</span>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water quality, pollution</li> <li>• integrated water resources management</li> <li>• Water-related ecosystems</li> <li>• Water-related disasters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Productive uses of water, transboundary cooperation <span style="float: right;">2a</span></li> <li>• Sources-to-sea linkages, aquatic biodiversity <span style="float: right;">2b</span></li> <li>• Water and climate change adaptation, natural water infrastructure, land and water <span style="float: right;">2c</span></li> </ul>
UN Environment actively follows issues related to: <span style="float: right;">3</span>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The global and regional water agendas <span style="float: right;">3a</span></li> <li>• The global and regional environment agendas <span style="float: right;">3b</span></li> <li>• The global and regional development agendas <span style="float: right;">3c</span></li> </ul>	