Two years after the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), countries know what they need to achieve. To meet water-related SDGs, they now need to better understand how they will achieve it, and to build national action plans that will ensure real sustainability for all.

The water crisis is a reality today for an increasing number of countries. Implementing SDG 6 - the ‘water goal’ – can bring development benefits and unlock long-term funding. However, many national governments are still struggling to decide what their next steps should be.

To deliver on SDG 6 targets, water experts and national decision makers need a strong enabling environment. To accelerated implementation, they also need to demonstrate to donors and their citizens that they are doing more than trying to “tick off” SDG 6 indicators: that they can effectively assess the current national situation and have addressed gaps and weaknesses with workable policies, frameworks and action plans.

This briefing sets out some approaches to developing enabling environments that are aligned with SDG 6 and that can keep countries on track to implement fully sustainable solutions.

Findings

• Effective national enabling environments that accelerate SDG implementation are built on collaborations between all concerned government institutions, expert groups and civil society.

• There are six critical components that governments can focus on to meet SDG 6 with equity and true sustainability: these are adequate capacity; policy and institutional strength; finance; gender mainstreaming; disaster risk reduction and resilience mainstreaming; and governance integrity.

• There are six steps to accelerate implementation. It begins with a situational analysis of these six critical components. Then, an effective analysis builds an evidence base that supports decision-making and implementation – from now to 2030.
Problems and Challenges

Water is arguably the development issue that touches the largest number of people through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Increasing water scarcity, water pollution, water-related disasters, and the ongoing degradation of water-dependent ecosystems, all mean that by 2030, many more countries risk being in water crisis (Guppy and Anderson 2017). Globally, there has been a 55% drop in water available per capita since 1960, and currently, more than 40% of the world’s population is affected by water scarcity. Further, in 2016 over 386 million people were affected by droughts and some 1.8 billion regularly used water that was not protected from faecal contamination.

Despite the urgent and complex problems that society faces, today – two years into the SDG era and faced with 17 Goals and 169 targets – the 2017 round of Voluntary National Reports to the SDG process reveal that many countries are struggling to put together substantive SDG action plans (Weitz et al., 2017). National governments and development actors are faced with competing priorities and limited budgets. All too often, water-related development falls behind other priorities.

What does an enabling environment for water policy and action look like?

To effectively deliver on the SDG 6 targets\(^1\), UNU-INWEH proposes six critical components that make a strong enabling environment for water.

Three components focus on the capability to implement:

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Capacity</td>
<td>Countries must have the ability to obtain, strengthen and maintain the capability to set and achieve their own development objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy and Institutions</td>
<td>Putting SDG 6 into action requires horizontal and vertical policy coherence, and the ability of institutions to make evidence-based decisions and build, implement and enforce inter-related policies</td>
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<td>Finance</td>
<td>Countries must define the costs and benefits of achieving each SDG 6 target, and align the national finance system to SDG targets, in an inclusive, green economy that supports water-related development</td>
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Three components ensure that implementation leads demonstrably to sustainability:

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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Country policies must address women’s specific water-related needs and empower women to participate at all levels of water management, including in decision-making and policy implementation, in ways defined by them.</td>
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<td>Risk reduction and resilience</td>
<td>Countries must have robust mechanisms to anticipate and reduce water-related disaster risk to protect communities; to assist communities to recover from water-related disasters; and to protect water assets, including infrastructure, from hazard impacts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Countries must end corruption and mainstream integrity and transparency practices across water policies, institutions and governance frameworks for greater accountability and trust in decision-making</td>
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These six components are a minimum list. Some countries may need to include, for example, a component for vulnerable groups based on ethnicity or income level; or for insecure areas, a component focused on civil-military coordination prevent water infrastructure becoming a military target.

UNU-INWEH’s work shows that many countries, particularly low and middle-income countries (LMICs), do not see how these components are part of their own enabling environment. This situation is problematic. If governments cannot assess strengths and weaknesses and track changes and progress for these components, they will not have an effective path to sustainability – or attract funds for national programs to put SDG 6 into action (Guppy et al. 2017).

How can countries build and track a strong enabling environment for SDG 6?

National governments and stakeholders can ensure a strong enabling environment for SDG 6 using six steps and based on the six critical components to make this happen.

\(^{1}\) See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg6
These steps lead to an evidence-based approach, that relies on cross-sector, inter-agency collaboration and dynamic planning.

1. Inventory current data and knowledge

The first step for governments is to inventory national data and knowledge. This is best done as a collaborative exercise including scientists, experts, policy-makers and decision-makers. Finding data may be the task of scientists and experts, but selecting which data to adopt must cross the science-policy divide (Oliver et al 2016).

2. Compile knowledge to create one authoritative evidence base

Data and knowledge must be translated into evidence that is useful, relevant and specifically made for the people that build better enabling environments. It is critical to create only one national evidence base for SDG 6, and to include only evidence that is validated and agreed on by all stakeholders – experts, scientists, policy-makers and decision-makers. This authoritative evidence base will then become the foundation for national discourse and decision making.

3. Use the evidence base to evaluate the current enabling environment for SDG 6, reporting gaps and strengths

The evidence base can be used to evaluate the current enabling environment against each target of SDG 6. For example:

Analyzing national budget allocations can show that decision-makers from the lead national financial institution are uncertain how to assess costs and benefits associated with SDG 6.6 and have yet to source funding for that target (gaps) while the lead national agency for this target has redesigned its strategy framework to focus on SDG outcomes for ecosystems (a strength).

4. Make a plan, involving all stakeholders, to address weaknesses and build on strengths

Once the enabling environment has been measured, it can be managed. Collaboration across multiple sectors and with multiple levels of government is vital. Collaboration means that all key stakeholders are involved in decision processes and are working to the same priorities under relevant national development plans.

At this stage, international expertise and support can be useful to support the progress of the national plan. Support from lead UN agencies are available to both high- and low-income countries.

5. Implement the plan across all water-related sectors, focusing on maintaining policy coherence and collaborative action

Putting the plan into action may require new mechanisms, the development of new skills and capacity, and the design of new policy and decision-making processes. To deliver SDG 6 success by 2030, these processes must be widely agreed by all and prioritised by the government.

6. Track progress in strengthening the six critical components and adjust plans as necessary over time

Collecting data, building evidence and analysing the six critical components of the enabling environment is an ongoing process. The evidence base should be a dynamic resource, with an agreed review process to keep it relevant and up to date. A dynamic evidence base will show change achieved and send clear national messaging around SDG 6 progress – to government stakeholders, donors and international stakeholders.

Six steps for Six components: the SDG PSS system to develop and deliver national plans

The SDG Policy Support System (SDG PSS) helps countries to follow the six steps and track success across the six critical components. In 2017 the SDG PSS was piloted by five countries – Costa Rica, Pakistan, Tunisia, Ghana and Republic of Korea.

Core features of the SDG PSS align with the six-step water SDG planning process. Country planners use it to collate data from a range of different, internationally available tools, such as the Capacity Development Toolkit designed by the United Nations Development Programme, and the Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) from UN-Water and the World Health Organisation.
The SDG PSS then automatically translates this data into cohesive evidence for decision-making, and it maps the evidence to SDG 6 indicators – for each of the six components. The summary products designed by the SDG PSS then become a focal point for collaborative planning for implementation. Box 1 shows how Tunisia is using the six steps.

Box 1: Six Steps and the SDG PSS in Tunisia

In 2017, Tunisia hosted a national workshop to accelerate progress against SDG 6 targets and indicators. 50 participants contributed, including 23 Government representatives from institutions including the lead Ministry - The Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries; 8 researchers from public institutions or universities; 4 representatives from international NGOs; 5 representatives of United Nations offices based in Tunisia; 1 representative of a regional research network; 2 representatives of local NGOs; and 5 representatives of public institutions involved in water and sanitation management.

A working group was formed from these participants, formally approved by the lead Ministry. The working group has 15 members – 13 government representatives and 2 researchers, comprising 7 women and 8 men. The expertise of the working group range from rural women’s issues to water quality, international development and hydrology.

The working group is driving a collaborative national approach to SDG 6, and is adapting the SDG Policy Support System to Tunisia’s national context in 2017, in preparation for its adoption in 2018.

SDG PSS is available in English, French and Spanish and in 2018 will be available in Korean. It is offered as an open source system for use and improvement by all countries. [http://inweh.unu.edu/sdg-policy-support-system-language/](http://inweh.unu.edu/sdg-policy-support-system-language/)

The SDG PSS was developed by the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health; the Korean Environment Corporation; the Ministry of Environment, Republic of Korea; and the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development.

References


Authors: Lisa Guppy
Editors: Vladimir Smakhtin and Michael Devlin
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