

Instant Expert

Sustainable Development Goal 6: Water

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that, by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity. These 17 integrated and indivisible goals balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. SDG 6 highlights the need for sustainable management of water and sanitation, recognising that access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is the most basic human need for health and wellbeing. This critical goal connects all the other SDGs.



On a blue planet, why is water an SDG?

The world's water related ecosystems are being degraded at an alarming rate. This is because demand for water is rising due to rapid population growth, urbanisation and increasing water needs from agriculture, industry and energy sectors. Decades of misuse, poor management, overextraction of groundwater and contamination of freshwater supplies have exacerbated water stress.

At the same time, surface water bodies including lakes, rivers and reservoirs are changing rapidly as a result of climate change. 20% of river basins are experiencing above natural fluctuations and we have lost 85% of global wetlands already. Wetlands are the most biologically diverse of all ecosystems, so unsustainable use and inappropriate management of these poses direct risks including disease and intensifies the release of stored carbon, fuelling further climate change.

The consequence of all this is that "40% of the world's people are affected by water scarcity; 80% of wastewater is discharged untreated into the environment, and more than 90% of disasters are water-related" says UN Secretary-General, António Guterres.

What action is being taken?

Water has steadily been rising up the sustainability agenda. A UN Decade of Action on Water commenced in 2018 with specific workstreams around knowledge generation and exchange, strengthening communication, advocacy and partnership working. A major water-specific United Nations Conference in March 2023 will provide a mid-term review.

In the meantime, the UN's 2022 SDG Progress Report signals that multiple, cascading and intersecting crises, dominated by COVID-19, climate change and conflict, have halted progress and magnified the challenges of achieving many SDGs.

It reveals that, if current activity is maintained, 1.6bn people will lack safe drinking water, 2.8bn people will lack safe sanitation and 1.9bn people will lack basic hand hygiene facilities by 2030. The pace of progress on water needs to quadruple.

What does this mean for my business?

SDGs are a roadmap out of crisis – of sorts. The focus, insight, governance and advocacy that the UN provides around them is vital for conveying the scale and urgency of action required to create sustainable development, but they do not provide granular solutions to address the specific situations individual organisations face.

No business can operate without water. Indeed water inefficiency injects multiple, unnecessary business risks. What constitutes responsible water management – and the operational and commercial security that comes with this – though, must come from the businesses themselves.

The latest UN report recommends that 'data and statistics can light the way' and that investment in this should be a priority. Understanding water consumption, risks and opportunities is certainly the best place to start this journey to becoming part of the solution rather than exacerbating the problem.

What should I do?

For bespoke advice and support, email info@waterscan.com or call 01243 839 880