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Briefing on the road to the 2026 United Nations water conference

Freshwater Priority Actions 2026–2029

to implement UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy

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Executive Summary

Freshwater ecosystems provide essential services for people and the planet. But these very systems are under mounting pressure from the combined impacts of climate change, ecosystem degradation, pollution and rising demand across food, energy, urban and industrial systems. Despite a decade of global attention under Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6), progress remains insufficient on key environmental dimensions of freshwater sustainability, particularly water quality, ecosystem integrity, and integrated water resources management. At the same time, the multilateral context has shifted, in particular as development finance is increasingly constrained and competition for resources has intensified. Against this backdrop, freshwater must be understood not as a standalone sector, but as a **connector and a foundational environmental system** - one that underpins climate stability, biodiversity health, and pollution reduction pathways while ultimately sustaining human wellbeing, equity, resilience, and sustainable development. How the international community organises action on freshwater during 2026–2029 will be a key test of its ability to deliver integrated solutions for a healthy, prosperous, and resilient people and planet, for SDG achievement and for informing the post-2030 development agenda. As the SDG era approaches its conclusion, there is a growing need to reposition freshwater within this broader transition, ensuring collective progress towards realizing the human rights to water and to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

This document sets out **UNEP's Freshwater Strategic Priorities for 2026–2029**, in direct support of UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) adopted at the seventh session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-7). It responds to operative paragraph 2 (b) of UNEA resolution 6/13 on "Effective and inclusive solutions for strengthening water policies to achieve sustainable development in the context of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution" in which the Executive Director of UNEP was requested to present to UNEA-7 a set of strategic priorities for how fresh water will connect across the medium-term strategy of UNEP for the period 2026–2029 and accelerate the implementation, and for how UNEP engages with the United Nations system-wide strategy on water and sanitation.

It provides a **clear signal** to Member States and partners on UNEP's role and mandate and promotes coherence across UNEP's freshwater-related work. It will also contribute to the operational implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation, by clarifying UNEP's priority areas of engagement within the broader UN system. It builds on the 2022–2025 priorities, while sharpening strategic choices in response to today's resource and institutional realities.

UNEP's strength lies in its role as the UN's environmental authority, grounded in science, data, and evidence. This includes strengthening the importance of freshwater systems underpinning sustainability; integrating science into environmental decision-making, convening purpose-driven partnerships; and supporting coherence across climate, nature, and pollution agendas.

UNEP's freshwater engagement for 2026–2029 is embedded within UNEP's environmental mandate and structured around three mutually reinforcing objectives that collectively address ecosystems, resilience, and pollution, with a fourth cross-cutting objective on integrated governance that supports the other objectives:

1. **Strengthening the environmental foundation of water**, by improving the visibility, conservation, protection and restoration of freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity that depends upon and supports them, as critical natural asset underpinning environmental sustainability and human well-being.
2. **Reducing water pollution and strengthening water quality monitoring capacities**, through the advancement of mass awareness of the sources and impacts, the uptake of nature-based solutions, strengthening ambient water quality monitoring and by prioritising pollution prevention at source.
3. **Facilitating science-based cooperation to enhance water and climate resilience** by providing, on request, technical and scientific assistance to Member States on freshwater management for climate action and ecosystem resilience, including in conflict-affected settings, and in relation to transboundary ecosystems where relevant.
4. **Supporting integrated freshwater and landscape management**, by advancing public awareness, advocacy and behaviour change, supporting governance, coordination, and basin- and landscape-scale approaches that translate planning into action, through integrated water resources management, nature-based solutions (NbS), and related governance frameworks and ecosystem-based management approaches.

These objectives are enabled by a cross-cutting set of **delivery functions:**

- **Core delivery pathway:** (1) science, data, monitoring, and assessment; (2) science-based communication; (3) decision-support and policy recommendations; (4) targeted country and basin level convening and project implementation.
- **Enabling functions:** (5) Science to policy translation and normative guidance; (6) partnerships and platforms that mobilise collective action; (7) innovation and digital transformation; (8) capacity development and institutional strengthening (9) gender and (10) Indigenous people knowledge mainstreaming; and (11) advocacy, communication and outreach.

Financing and resource mobilisation are approached with **realistic assumptions**. UNEP's freshwater work is catalytic, using limited core resources to strengthen scientific foundations, shape enabling conditions, reduce investment risk, and unlock larger flows of climate, nature, and pollution finance. Strategic partnerships — including with multilateral environmental agreements, global funds such as the GEF and GCF, international financial institutions, and national, regional, and global knowledge partners — are central to achieving scale and durability in a constrained funding landscape.

Success is measured through **UNEP's Programme of Work and results framework**, with emphasis on learning, adaptation, and accountability to Member States. Ultimately, success will be defined by the extent to which freshwater is better governed through science, integrated into environmental decision-making and reflected in investment priorities — supporting climate stability, nature recovery and a pollution reduction in achievement of and the transition beyond the SDG framework.

1 Freshwater Strategic Priorities supporting UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy 2026-2029

For Member States and partners, this document outlines how freshwater ecosystems and related topics are addressed to support UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy for 2026-2029 (MTS), adopted by the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-7). The aim is to inspire and promote collaboration for the benefit of freshwater, other ecosystems, people, and economies. Within UNEP, the document provides a common framework for the various groups that contribute to UNEP's freshwater-related work.

The MTS has three strategic objectives: supporting countries to advance climate stability; living in harmony with nature across land, ocean, and freshwater systems; and a pollution-free planet. These strategic objectives are addressed through three thematic sub-programmes, underpinned by two foundational sub-programmes (science-policy, and environmental law and governance), and two enabling subprogrammes (finance and economic transformations, and digital transformations) (Figure 1).

This Freshwater Strategic Priorities document supports all seven MTS subprogrammes in an integrated manner, building on the equivalent 2022-2025 document. The work is anchored in UNEP's role in various Multilateral Environmental Agreements and global frameworks, including SDG 6 custodianship (6.3.2, 6.5.1, 6.6.1), and UNEA mandates, including the request for increasing coherence, cooperation and synergies across UNEP (UNEA-6/13), multilateral environmental agreements and the wider United Nations system, including the UN System-wide strategy on Water and Sanitation.

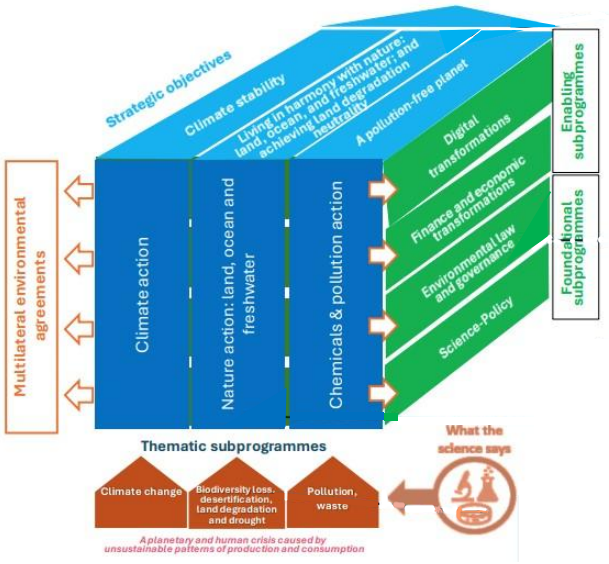


Figure 1: The 3 strategic objectives and 7 subprogrammes of UNEP's MTS 2026-2029

2 Strategic Context: A Changing Global Landscape

2.1 Freshwater in a Changing Global Landscape and Implications for Multilateral Action

Despite a decade of global attention under Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6), progress on environmentally related dimensions of freshwater remains uneven. In many countries, freshwater ecosystems continue to degrade, ambient water quality trends are declining, and climate variability is increasing exposure to floods, droughts, and water-related risks.

At the same time, experience under SDG 6 demonstrates that **shared global frameworks, consistent indicators, and monitoring systems can catalyse policy reform, coordination, and investment**. Monitoring has proven to be not only an information-gathering exercise, but a mechanism that mobilises institutions and financing, aligns stakeholders and fosters cross-sector integration, drives communication and advocacy, and informs decision-making.

This progress has unfolded within a rapidly changing development and multilateral context. Official development assistance is increasingly constrained, competition for funding has intensified, and there is heightened scrutiny of effectiveness, coherence, and value for money. Moreover, freshwater issues cut across climate, biodiversity, pollution, disaster risk, food systems, human health, and other development agendas, yet institutional responsibilities remain fragmented. This combination of converging pressures and constrained resources underscores the need for **system level coordination** at global, regional, and country levels, taking into account different contexts and the need for efficiencies and co-benefits.

As a result, multilateral action on freshwater is shifting toward: (a) strengthening normative frameworks and standards; (b) improving the science–policy–finance interface; (c) enabling coherence across climate, biodiversity, pollution, sustainable development and water agendas; and (d) supporting countries to use data and evidence more systematically in planning, investment, and practical implementation. Within this evolving architecture, clarity of roles is essential. UNEP will prioritise catalytic functions, partner strategically, and concentrate on areas where it can add distinct value.

In this context, freshwater is increasingly recognised not as a standalone sector, but as a **connector and foundational environmental system** that underpins climate stability, ecosystem integrity, pollution reduction pathways, human wellbeing, and sustainable economic development. How the multilateral system organises itself around freshwater during 2026–2029 will be a critical test of its ability to deliver integrated solutions to the triple planetary crisis—and to inform post-2030 global environmental and development frameworks.

2.2 UNEP's Unique Position and Mandate on Freshwater

UNEP's unique position on freshwater lies in its mandate as the UN's leading environmental authority and its ability to address freshwater as an environmental system that connects climate, nature, and pollution agendas. Rather than operating as a sectoral delivery agency, UNEP's role is to provide science-based environmental leadership, enable coherence across frameworks, and

support the translation of science into policy and investment decisions, as well as strategic advocacy and wide-reaching communication.

UNEP brings a distinct and complementary perspective to freshwater challenges—one that emphasises ecosystem integrity, environmental thresholds, long-term resilience, and the role of nature-based solutions. UNEP elevates healthy freshwater ecosystems as critical natural infrastructure for climate resilience, biodiversity, land management and human wellbeing, and frames water quality and pollution as core environmental risks rather than solely service delivery issues. Through this lens, UNEP helps connect water action with environmental agendas, reinforcing and complementing the work of other actors across the UN system.

This positioning allows UNEP to integrate freshwater considerations into global environmental assessments and policy dialogues; support Member States in aligning national water strategies with global environmental commitments; and to support Member States to highlight trade-offs and synergies across environmental and development objectives that may otherwise be addressed in isolation. UNEP's freshwater work is underpinned by scientific data and evidence, global monitoring and data platforms, a strong science–policy interface, convening power and strategic partnerships (see also Section 4).

UNEP is a core member of **UN-Water** and plays a central role in supporting system-wide coherence on freshwater and its management. A key pillar of this contribution is UNEP's leadership in integrated monitoring and assessment, notably through its custodianship and co-custodianship of SDG 6 indicators and its role in the UN-Water coordinated **SDG 6 Integrated Monitoring Initiative (IMI-SDG6)**. Under the **UN system-wide strategy on water and sanitation**, UNEP also supports alignment of SDG 6 action with climate adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation, pollution prevention, and disaster risk reduction.

UNEP's leading position on environmental science is further reinforced by its roles within key **multilateral environmental agreements** and global frameworks, including the SDGs (within and beyond SDG 6), the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the chemicals and waste conventions (Basel, Stockholm and Minamata), the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, climate frameworks under the UNFCCC (including through the Baku dialogue and the Global Goal on Adaptation), and collaboration with UNCCD. Through these mandates, UNEP acts as a connector across frameworks that collectively shape freshwater outcomes.

In operational terms, UNEP prioritises leadership where it brings distinctive system value as requested by countries—such as global environmental agenda-setting on freshwater, integrated science and monitoring, and coherence across environmental frameworks—and **partners working closely with other actors** where they are better placed to lead on infrastructure, service delivery, humanitarian response and project finance. This partnering approach allows UNEP to strengthen environmental outcomes at scale without duplicating delivery roles better fulfilled by development banks, UN development agencies, and national institutions. UNEP supports country-led assistance and capacity building to help them link global, regional and national agendas.

Beyond 2030, global demand for integrated, environmentally grounded water solutions is expected to intensify as climate risks increase, biodiversity declines accelerate and pollution pressures grow. Wars and conflicts add further stress on freshwater sources and availability. During 2026–2029, UNEP will position itself to continue providing credible leadership on freshwater in a changing multilateral system — supporting countries and partners to address water challenges not as isolated sectoral issues, but as central elements of a healthy, resilient and pollution free planet.

Specifically, UNEP will engage to support the design of post-2030 frameworks, including: the SDGs (especially through IMI-SDG6); UNFCCC; UNCCD; CBD; and Sendai Framework. These reflections will be led within the appropriate intergovernmental processes and according to the timeline agreed by Member States.

3 Strategic Objectives and Focus Areas (2026–2029)

UNEP's freshwater engagement for 2026–2029 is structured around three mutually reinforcing objectives that collectively address ecosystems, resilience, and pollution, with a fourth cross-cutting objective on integrated governance that supports the other objectives:

- **SO1 – Strengthening the environmental foundation of water:** by improving the visibility, conservation, protection, and restoration of freshwater ecosystems as critical natural asset.
- **SO2 – Reducing water pollution and strengthening water quality monitoring capacity**, through the advancement of mass awareness of the sources and impacts of pollution, uptake of nature-based solutions and technological solutions, strengthening ambient water quality monitoring and by prioritising pollution prevention at source and across sectors.

  SO3 – Facilitating science-based cooperation to enhance water and climate resilience by providing, on request, technical and scientific assistance to Member States on freshwater management for climate action and ecosystem resilience, including in conflict-affected settings, and in relation to transboundary ecosystems where relevant.

- **SO4 – Supporting integrated freshwater and landscape management**, by advancing awareness, governance, coordination, and basin- and landscape-scale approaches that translate planning into action, through integrated water resources management and related governance frameworks.

These objectives are enabled by a cross-cutting set of **delivery functions** that underpin delivery across all Strategic Objectives (see section 4)**:**

- Core delivery pathway: science, monitoring, and assessment; decision support and policy recommendations; and targeted country and basin engagement.
- Enabled by: science-to-policy translation; partnership platforms; innovation and digital transformation; gender mainstreaming; and advocacy and communication

This framework prioritises quality, coherence, and partnership to deliver system-level impact under constrained resources. Illustrative examples of activities from the 2022-2025 period, many of which continue in the current phase, are provided in square brackets in sections 3.1-3.4.

Across all objectives, UNEP's delivery model is designed to move from monitoring and assessment to science-based advocacy and communication, decision-support, to on-the-ground action and

implementation (see figure 2, left-hand column), working with Member States to provide demand-driven technical assistance and capacity-building at both country- and basin level. This progression ensures that global and national data are translated into decision-ready information and practical responses that deliver measurable environmental outcomes, while capturing lessons learned to inform partners and stakeholders and guide future action.

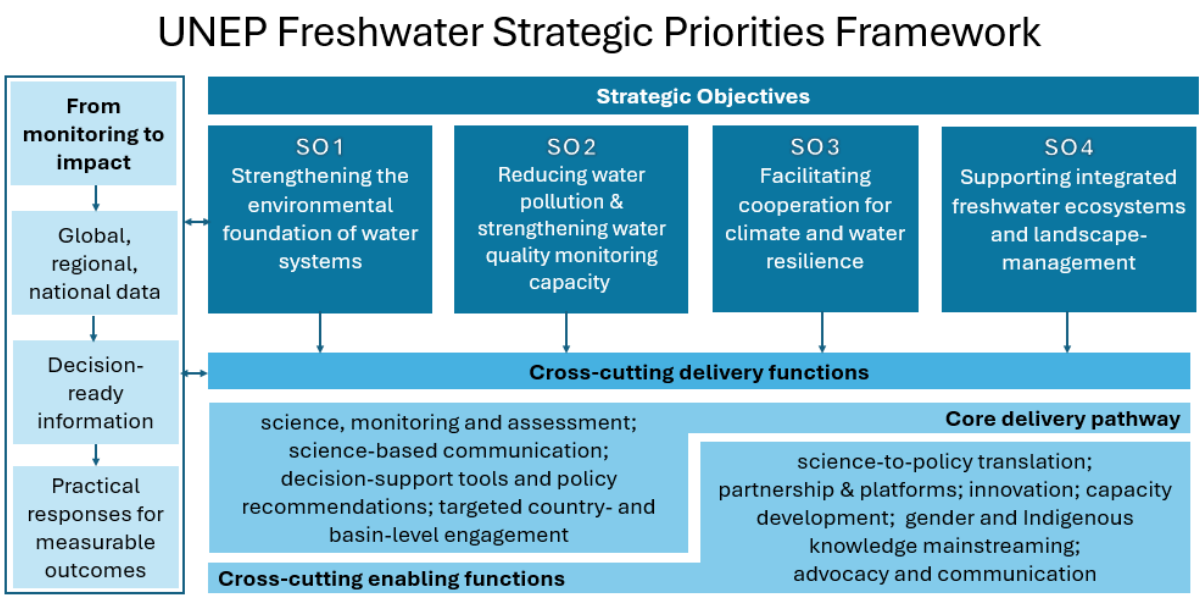


Figure 2: UNEP Freshwater Strategic Priorities Framework 2026-2029

3.1 Strategic Objective 1: Strengthening the Environmental Foundation of Water Systems

Freshwater ecosystems — wetlands, including rivers, lakes and peatlands[1], glaciers, and the cryosphere[2], forests, mountain ecosystems[3], and groundwater dependent ecosystems — form the environmental foundation of sustainable freshwater provision. They regulate flows, sustain water quality, buffer floods and droughts, and support biodiversity, food systems, and livelihoods. Yet many countries continue to experience degradation of one or more freshwater ecosystem types, undermining progress across climate, biodiversity, and development agendas.

[1] As per the definition provided in Article 1 of the "Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat" known as Ramsar Convention.

[2] Resolution UNEA7/10. Preservation of glaciers and the broader cryosphere, in particular in mountain regions recognizes the interconnections between the preservation and protection of the cryosphere, glaciers and their ecosystems and climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, sea-level rise and disaster risk reduction

[3] Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 6.6 calls for the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.

Strategic intent: UNEP will strengthen the environmental and scientific foundation of water resource management by improving the visibility and understanding of freshwater ecosystems, including through enhanced capacity building and water education and by advocating for their integration into policy, planning and investment decisions, while supporting targeted action to protect, restore and sustainably manage these ecosystems. This objective is intricately linked to UNEP's custodianship of **SDG indicator 6.6.1.**

Focus areas:

- **Monitoring and assessment of freshwater ecosystems**, enabling countries to understand and address trends in volumes, availabilities, conditions, and pressures at national, subnational and basin scales.
- **Conservation, protection, and restoration of high value ecosystems**, including wetlands, and mountain systems, through Nature-based Solutions (NbS), climate adaptation, and biodiversity.
- **Mainstreaming ecosystems into planning and finance**, including alignment with biodiversity strategies, climate adaptation plans, and land use decisions [e.g. Global Wetland Watch].

3.2 Strategic Objective 2: Reducing Water Pollution and Strengthening Water Quality Monitoring Capacity

Water pollution remains a pervasive and growing pressure on freshwater ecosystems and human health. Nutrients, wastewater, chemicals, and solid waste continue to degrade water quality, while monitoring and response capacities vary widely across regions.

Strategic intent: UNEP will strengthen the awareness, measurement, prevention, and reduction of freshwater pollution, focusing on ambient water quality and ecosystem health, through tailored support across sectors, governance levels, and water user groups, including private actors. This objective is anchored in UNEP's custodianship of **SDG indicator 6.3.2**, while emphasising prevention at source and integration with broader pollution and chemicals agendas.

Focus areas:

- **Strengthening water quality monitoring and reporting**, including ambient water quality indicators and ecosystem-health-relevant parameters, through capacity building, dissemination of citizen science, as well as policy-support to the development of innovative technologies (e.g. satellite data and Earth Observation, sensors, modelling).
- **Pollution prevention and policy action**, addressing wastewater, nutrients, plastics, and hazardous chemicals affecting freshwater systems, through circular and preventative approaches such as reuse and resource recovery (e.g. Global Wastewater Initiative) and priority technological solutions, supported by public awareness and advocacy efforts to drive behavioural and systemic change.
- **Promoting integrated multi-sectoral responses to pollution** (e.g. on mining and minerals, textiles, pesticides, or pharmaceuticals, as well as Anti-Microbial Resistance) and the mainstreaming of Nature-based solutions.

3.3 Strategic Objective 3: Facilitating Cooperation for Climate and Water Resilience

Water availability, water quality and extreme water-related events are affecting ecosystems, societies and economies. Climate change is reshaping the hydrological cycle, intensifying floods and droughts and amplifying water-related hazards – with exposure and vulnerability often highest in conflict affected contexts. Science-informed cooperation on the management of watersheds and water-related ecosystems can deliver substantial environmental, socio-economic and health co-benefits, including strengthening resilience and supporting recovery in conflict-affected settings where water governance and monitoring systems have been weakened.

Strategic intent: UNEP will address freshwater in the context of its work and mandate, to strengthen climate and ecosystems resilience, reduce disaster risks, increase resilience, and support cooperation, particularly in climate vulnerable, transboundary, and conflict-affected settings.

Focus areas:

- **Building resilience to water related climate risks**, facilitating integration of science-based and nature-based approaches relevant to freshwater ecosystems into climate adaptation, mitigation and disaster risk reduction frameworks. Emphasis will be placed on the assessment, protection, and sustainable use of groundwater resources, which are essential for livelihoods; and supporting management of watersheds to deliver multiple and shared benefits.
- **Scaling-up ecosystem-based approaches to the conservation of critical ecosystems**, including wetlands, floodplains and urban nature that reduce exposure to extreme events and secure lasting ecosystem services (e.g. Generation Restoration, NbS for water resilience).
- **Facilitating science-based environmental cooperation**, supporting dialogue and enabling co-design of joint interventions via provision of the best available science, including in conflict-affected settings and across transboundary basins.

3.4 Strategic Objective 4: Supporting Integrated Freshwater Ecosystems and Landscape-Management

Water outcomes are shaped by decisions across land, agriculture, cities, energy, infrastructure and many other areas. Differing institutional frameworks and the need for enhanced cross-sectoral coordination remain major challenges to sustainable management, at regional, national and subnational levels. Addressing these challenges supports the progressive realization of the human right to water and sanitation (UNGA Res 64/292) and the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (UNGA Res. 76/300) in accordance with national legislation, priorities, contexts and circumstances

Strategic intent: UNEP will support countries to strengthen **integrated approaches to water resources management** that encompass the full water cycle, including land-moisture and the cryosphere. SDG reporting and assessment will serve as an entry point to improve governance, coordination, and implementation. Anchored in UNEP's custodianship of **SDG indicator 6.5.1,** this objective focuses on translating integrated planning into practical outcomes [e.g. SDG 6 IWRM Support Programme]. It also emphasizes the importance, in policy making, of disaggregated data - by gender, age and poverty - to better capture inequalities and vulnerabilities related to water access,

quality and exposure to pollution. Related to IWRM, this strategic objective includes other similar management paradigms such as Sustainable Land Management (SLM), the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus, source-to-sea, and ridge-to-reef approaches.

Focus areas:

- **Strengthening enabling environments** for integrated water and land management by promoting cross-sectoral approaches grounded in the WEFE Nexus. This includes enhancing coordination mechanisms and stakeholder participation to identify and advance policy entry points, such as improving agricultural water use efficiency and strengthening governance for irrigation and other high-demand sectors.
- **Basin- and landscape-scale approaches** that connect freshwater ecosystems with land use decisions, and including upstream and downstream considerations.
- **From plans to action**, helping countries identify implementable, investable responses to priority IWRM gaps.

4 Delivery Functions

Across all four Strategic Objectives, UNEP's freshwater work is delivered through a shared set of cross-cutting functions. These functions describe how UNEP operates on freshwater—independent of thematic focus—and reflect roles that are both foundational to UNEP's mandate and enabling of system-wide impact. They ensure coherence across objectives, reduce duplication, and allow UNEP to apply its comparative advantage consistently across environmental, governance, pollution, and resilience agendas.

Group 1 reflects UNEP's core delivery logic on freshwater, moving from scientific assessment and monitoring, through science-based communication, decision-support, and policy guidance, to implementation and impact. Group 2 reflects the enabling functions. Underpinning these functions is UNEP's role in generating, synthesising, and translating environmental science to inform decisions and support countries and partners in their policies, investments, and practical action.

Group 1 — Core delivery pathway (the "flow")

1. **Science, data, monitoring, and assessment (local to global).** UNEP's SDG custodianship provides a backbone for water-related environmental intelligence, supported by platforms including the **Freshwater Ecosystems Explorer (SDG 6.6.1)**, the **IWRM Data Portal (SDG 6.5.1)**, and the **SDG Water Quality Hub (SDG 6.3.2)** alongside **GEMS/Water/GEMStat** for water quality data and assessment. Beyond monitoring the SDGs, UNEP also provides global data platforms and frameworks such as the World Environment Situation Room (WESR) and the Global Environmental Data Strategy (GEDS).
2. **Science-based communication to increase public awareness and inform public and private sector decision-makers.** UNEP will work with partners, through Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), and other existing platforms, such as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration or the UN Ocean Decade, providing science-based information to support Member States in enhancing public awareness and national capacity.
3. **Decision-support tools and policy recommendations**. UNEP will provide scientific and technical **recommendations** and tools that help decision-makers to translate monitoring into robust policy and investment choices, working where relevant at local, national, landscape,

basin, regional and global levels. UNEP support may include Decision Support System (DSS) and modelling approaches, leveraging in-house synergies such as the integration of environmental data through the WESR; supporting the integration of climate projections, environmental considerations and nature-based solutions into freshwater resources planning; and provision of tools co-designed with partners (e.g. UNEP-DHI hydrological modelling and DSS ; and data-driven national workflows in other areas).

4. **Targeted country- and basin-level projects that demonstrate impact and mobilise resources.** In a constrained funding environment, UNEP will continue to work with partners and integrate science- and nature-based approaches to deliver **on-the-ground projects**, which demonstrate impact, inform policy and sustain delivery capacity. UNEP's long-standing partnerships and water-related portfolios with donors and funds (e.g., GEF, GCF, IKI, EU) support catalysing policy transformation through demonstrated impact, as exemplified by initiatives such as the Congo Basin Landscape Initiative. UNEP's Community Action for Fresh Water partnership with Rotary International further demonstrates how UNEP can support community-level action for freshwater conservation and restoration at scale.

Group 2 — Cross-cutting enabling functions (apply across all strategic priorities and all stages of the above core delivery pathway):

1. **Science-to-policy translation and normative guidance.** UNEP will continue to translate scientific evidence into policy, and subsequently into legislative and normative guidance to support implementation across sectors and frameworks. This will be pursued, among others, through UNEP-led initiatives, such as the **Global Peatlands Initiative** and related assessment products. Normative guidance will be complemented by institutional strengthening measures to ensure effective implementation on the ground.
2. **Partnerships and platforms that mobilise collective action.** UNEP delivers most of its activities through partnerships and will continue to promote integrated, collaborative solutions. Such engagement can help mobilise political attention, strengthen policy coherence and create enabling conditions for implementation and investment. Within the UN system, UNEP works through and supports UN-Water, the interagency coordination mechanism bringing together more than 35 UN entities and collaborates with other UN agencies on priority freshwater issues. UNEP will continue to work closely with the UN Development Coordination Office, UN Resident Coordinators/Humanitarian Coordinators and UN Country Teams to enhance delivery of science and best practices at country and regional levels, including in conflict-affected settings. UNEP will also deliver through convening platforms that catalyse implementation and investment—such as the **Global Wastewater Initiative** and the **World Water Quality Alliance** for water quality and wastewater; the **SDG 6 IWRM Support Programme** for governance and action planning; the **Global Wetland Watch** initiative for closing the wetlands data gap; the **Global Alliance for Highly Hazardous Pesticides** and the **Quadripartite for One Health** targeting AMR and sectoral actions; the **Global Plastics Hub** / GPML for upstream pollution prevention and data driven action planning. UNEP will engage, as appropriate and within its mandate, with broader international policy and economic platforms, including the G7 and G20, to promote integrated consideration of freshwater within discussions on climate, biodiversity, pollution, sustainable finance, resilience, and economic transformation.

3. **Innovation and digital transformation.** UNEP will strengthen freshwater outcomes through the application and scaling of fit-for-purpose innovations that enhance monitoring, analysis, and decision-making. This includes the use of traditional knowledge, verifiable citizen science (notably for water quality, e.g. through the World Water Quality Alliance), and growing digital approaches using Earth Observation, advanced data integration, modelling, big data, and AI-enabled analytics.
4. **Capacity development and institutional strengthening**. UNEP will support Member States in building the technical, institutional, and financial capacities required to design, implement, and sustain effective freshwater interventions. This includes strengthening national and subnational institutions, enhancing finance readiness to access climate and nature funding, and strengthening policy and normative guidance, ensuring that countries are equipped not only to adopt frameworks and standards, but also to operationalise them.
5. **Gender mainstreaming.** UNEP will integrate gender equality and social inclusion considerations across its freshwater work, recognising differentiated impacts, roles, and access to decision-making related to water. This includes promoting the collection and use of disaggregated data, strengthening gender-responsive IWRM indicators, supporting capacity-building for women in the water sector, applying gender-responsive analysis in assessments and policies, and advancing inclusive governance processes in line with UNEP's organisation-wide gender commitments.
6. **Promotion of Indigenous and traditional knowledge** as a knowledge input to monitoring and NbS design, particularly for wetlands, and basin protection and restoration.
7. **Advocacy, communications, and outreach.** UNEP will support the delivery of freshwater priorities through targeted advocacy, as well as communication and outreach, translating scientific evidence and policy messages into accessible, decision-relevant formats. This includes strengthening visibility of freshwater as a foundational environmental system and supporting coherent messaging across climate, nature, and pollution agendas.

5 Financing, Prioritisation and Resource Mobilisation

This strategic document will guide actions shaped by realistic funding assumptions in a constrained resource environment, implemented primarily through voluntary contributions and programme-based funding, with a strong emphasis on partnerships, prioritisation and value added.

UNEP's freshwater activities are financed through earmarked and softly earmarked contributions from global and bilateral funding mechanisms, complemented by the Environment Fund. Freshwater outcomes are typically delivered as part of **multifocal and integrated programmes**, reflecting the crosscutting nature of freshwater across climate, biodiversity, pollution, land, ecosystems, and sustainable development agendas.

UNEP brings to freshwater a **longstanding and multifocal engagement with major international funding mechanisms**, including:

- **Global Environment Facility (GEF)**: UNEP is an implementing partner across multiple focal areas with strong relevance to freshwater ecosystems, transboundary waters, water quality, and integrated water management;

- **Green Climate Fund (GCF)** and the **Adaptation Fund**: where UNEP supports climate adaptation, resilience, and risk reduction programming that integrates freshwater and ecosystems;
- Bilateral financing mechanisms such as **IKI** and the **European Union**, which increasingly support integrated climate–nature–water approaches; and
- Collaboration with **international financial institutions and development banks**, particularly where UNEP contributes upstream environmental guidance, standards, safeguards, and alignment with multilateral environmental agreements.

These partnerships form the core resource base for UNEP's freshwater work during 2026–2029. In parallel, UNEP supports Member States at a more macro level to strengthen their ability to access and effectively absorb climate and nature finance. This includes advancing finance readiness, supporting the development of project pipelines, and providing policy and normative guidance. Together, these complementary roles help countries build an enabling environment that enhances institutional capacity and accelerates investment in sustainable water management.

Prioritisation and portfolio discipline

Given sustained competition for international environmental funding and continued reliance on voluntary contributions, UNEP applies **portfolio discipline and strategic prioritisation** to its freshwater engagement, including through:

- supporting policy, legal and governance reform related to freshwater and ecosystems;
- supporting national and transboundary decision-making through monitoring, assessment, and data driven analysis to advance mutually beneficial solutions;
- delivering and supporting country- and basin-level projects that demonstrate integrated, scalable approaches aligned with multilateral environmental goals.

For on-the-ground delivery, UNEP works **in partnership** with governments, UN entities, development agencies and financial institutions, contributing design, coordination, environmental integrity, and implementation support rather than acting as a primary financier.

Catalytic influence and engagement with the private and finance sector

While this section focuses on resourcing UNEP's freshwater work, UNEP's activities are also designed to **influence broader flows of public and private finance indirectly**, where this aligns with programme objectives. This catalytic role includes aligning freshwater priorities with climate, nature, and pollution finance, and ensuring that investments are informed by evidence, sound science, environmental safeguards, and coherent policy frameworks.

In this context, UNEP is fostering private sector engagement by promoting corporate water stewardship, supply chain accountability, and industry-specific pollution prevention in accordance with national legislation, policies and priorities. At the same time, the **UNEP Finance Initiative (UNEP-FI)** helps integrate freshwater-relevant considerations into financial sector frameworks, tools, and guidance, including the identification of risks on investment for unsustainable freshwater ecosystem use and impacts. This engagement complements UNEP's programme delivery by strengthening the conditions under which freshwater outcomes can be supported beyond UNEP-managed resources.

6 Measuring Success, Learning and Accountability

Implementation of the Freshwater Strategic Priorities for 2026–2029 is fully embedded within **UNEP's approved Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) and Programme of Work (PoW)**. This strategic document does not introduce a separate results framework. Progress is measured through UNEP's existing organisational results architecture, as endorsed by Member States through the United Nations Environment Assembly.

Results orientation and alignment with the Programme of Work

Freshwater-related activities contribute primarily to outcomes under the **Nature Action, Climate Action, and Chemicals and Pollution Action subprogrammes**, as well as to foundational subprogrammes on **science–policy** and **environmental governance**. Results are tracked through UNEP's established PoW indicators and biennial milestones, including contributions linked to UNEP's custodianship of relevant SDG indicators and mandates under multilateral environmental agreements.

Learning, adaptation, and course correction

Given the complexity of freshwater systems and the uncertainties associated with climate change, socioeconomic pressures and financing conditions, UNEP places strong emphasis on **learning-oriented delivery**. Monitoring, assessment, and evaluation are used not only for accountability, but also to inform adaptive management, prioritisation, and course correction across the 2026–2029 period.

Learning is generated through regular programme monitoring, synthesis of country- and basin-level experience, and evaluation processes implemented in line with UNEP's organisation-wide policies. This learning informs adjustments to programme design and delivery, ensuring that limited resources remain focused where they deliver the greatest strategic value.

Transparency and accountability to Member States

Accountability for freshwater-related work is ensured through existing UNEP governance and reporting mechanisms, including PoW reporting, programme performance reporting, independent evaluations and engagement with the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the United Nations Environment Assembly. These mechanisms provide Member States with **transparent, comparable, and verifiable information** on progress, challenges, and risks, and ensure that freshwater action remains firmly situated within UNEP's agreed mandates and resource envelope.

7 Concluding reflections

The period 2026–2029 comes at a critical juncture for freshwater systems globally. Pressures on freshwater ecosystems, water quality and resilience are intensifying in many regions, driven by climate change, pollution, land-use change, and growing demand. At the same time, the final years of the 2030 Agenda as well as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and increasing awareness of environmental limits and planetary boundaries underscore the urgency of moving beyond fragmented approaches towards integrated, evidence-based solutions that recognise freshwater as a foundational environmental system for sustainable and just socioeconomic development.

Through these Freshwater Strategic Priorities, UNEP positions its freshwater work to deliver maximum value in a constrained global context, while informing the development of UNEP's internal framework for delivering on freshwater priorities. By focusing on science, monitoring, and assessment; translating evidence into decision support; and enabling coherent action and public support through partnerships, advocacy, communication, and targeted implementation, UNEP concentrates on areas where its environmental mandate and system-wide role offer clear added value. This approach is critical for environmental outcomes underpinning sustainable socio-economic development, resilience, and sustainability.

Looking ahead, the 2026–2029 period is also critical for shaping post-2030 frameworks across climate, biodiversity, land, and sustainable development. UNEP's freshwater engagement during this time will help inform emerging agendas by demonstrating how integrated freshwater action can support climate resilience, nature positive development, and pollution prevention within environmental limits. As global challenges deepen, UNEP's role as a trusted source of environmental science, coherence and convening becomes increasingly central to translating ambition into durable outcomes for freshwater, ecosystems, and people.