



FLOWING TOWARDS PEACE

Recommendations ahead of the
2026 UN Water Conference



JULY 2026

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FOREWORD FROM SENEGAL

Water is central to humanity's most pressing challenges and a key vehicle for peace. This publication argues that water is more than a resource to be managed: it is fundamental to dignity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. The Africa Water Vision 2063 anchors this conviction with continental force, calling for a paradigm shift that recognises water's contribution to livelihoods, regional integration, peace, and security.

The policy brief is very timely: climate change, environmental degradation, demographic pressures, and geopolitical tensions are placing water systems under unprecedented pressure. However, we must see this not as a crisis but rather as an opportunity to build cooperation, strengthen resilience, and reaffirm water as a foundation for shared prosperity.

Over five decades, this has been Senegal's lived experience with its neighbors: in building transboundary cooperation through the Senegal River Basin Development Organization (OMVS), the Gambia River Basin Organization (OMVG) and for the Senegalo-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin, we have demonstrated that

equitable governance of shared waters fosters trust, dialogue, and prosperity; a living proof that hydrodiplomacy works.

As co-host of the 2026 UN Water Conference, Senegal is committed to carrying this spirit forward. This policy brief argues that peace is the central thread connecting all six interactive dialogues of the Conference. At their core, each asks the same question: how can water build more peaceful, just, and resilient societies?

I call on Member States, international organisations, researchers, and practitioners to engage seriously with the recommendations set out in this brief. The momentum is ours to sustain. Let us ensure that water remains a lasting political priority, and that we merge our flows toward the future we share.

H.E. Dr Cheikh Tidiane Dieye

Minister of Hydraulics and Sanitation,
Republic of Senegal



FOREWORD FROM THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Water is the foundation for sustainable and equitable human dignity, for collective safety and stability, and for prosperity for all nations. It is our most precious resource.

Water should be prioritized and protected; and, the value of water, and how we can collectively protect this pipeline, needs to be prioritized in discussions and decision-making, at every level. From diplomacy to public policy, city planning and civil society, to business and industry - water is integral to prosperity, stability, and life.

The 2026 UN Water Conference is the most significant, global moment of convergence that places water at the front of the agenda - where it belongs. This is the first UN Conference dedicated to accelerating the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG6), which underpins progress across the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The United Arab Emirates, as Co-Host of the 2026 UN Water Conference, alongside Senegal, applauds thoughtful collaborations that both recognize the true value of water and further inspire and mobilize public and private

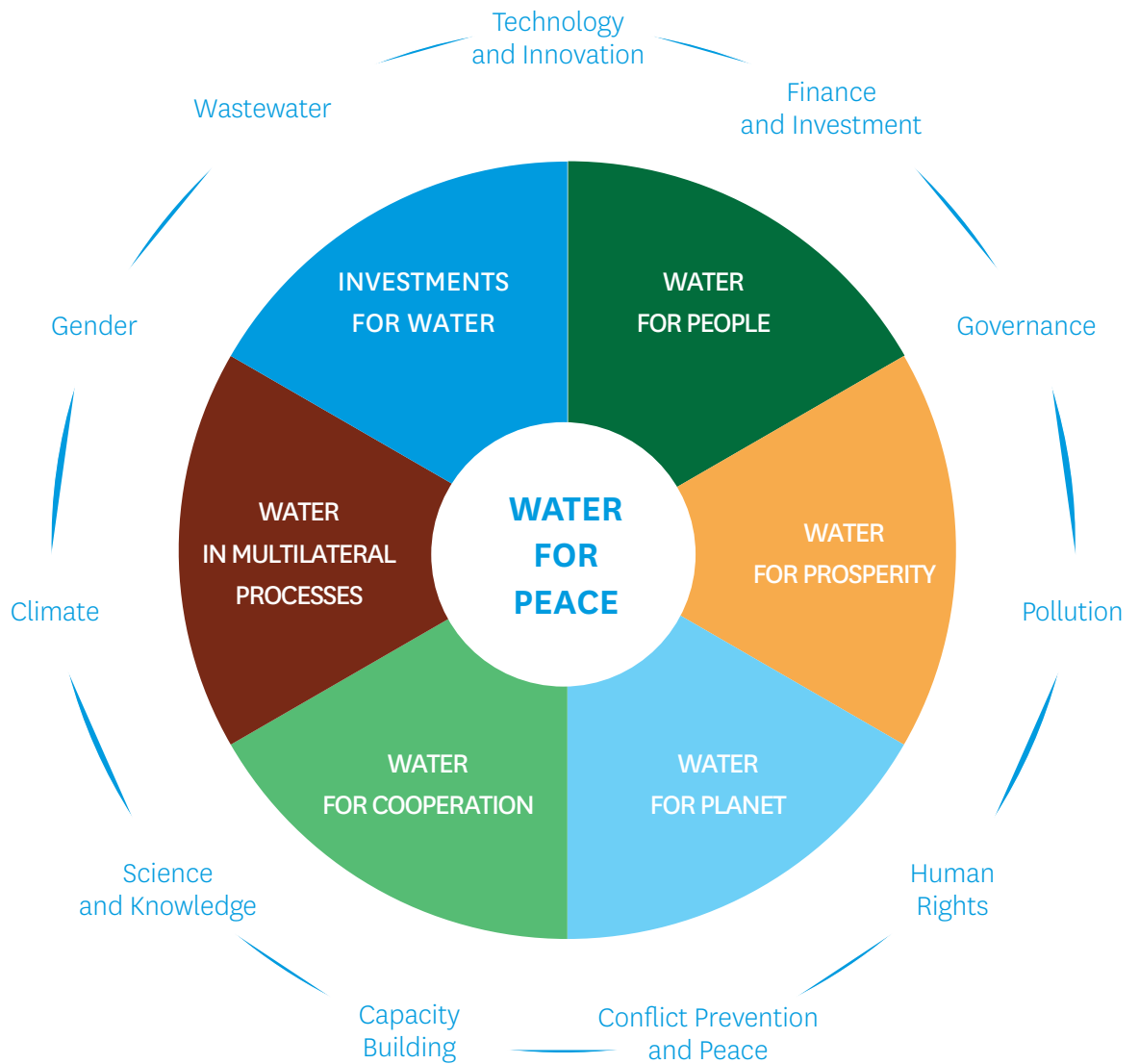
sector stakeholders to action. We congratulate the Geneva Water Hub, TRENDS Research & Advisory, and the Pôle Eau Dakar on the launch of this timely policy brief, which underscores the critical and inseparable link between water and peace.

As we look ahead to the Conference in December in Abu Dhabi, we call on all stakeholders to continue to engage with ideas, collaborations, and cross-sectoral and innovative commitments that can deliver inclusive political, technical, and quantifiable solutions that will address the scale and urgency of the global water challenge.

The 2026 UN Water Conference presents an unparalleled opportunity - to improve lives, support ecosystems and communities, and accelerate access to clean water and sanitation systems for all. Water is life, and every future flows from water.

H.E. Abdulla Balalaa

Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Energy and Sustainability, United Arab Emirates



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PEACE is the unifying thread across all six interactive dialogues of the 2026 UN Water Conference



No Peace without Water, No Water without Peace

The 2026 UN Water Conference comes at a moment of deep global instability and renewed political attention to water. Building on the momentum of the 2023 UN Water Conference, the 2026 Conference, co-hosted by Senegal and the United Arab Emirates, will be organized around six interactive dialogues: Water for People, Water for Prosperity, Water for Planet, Water for Cooperation, Water in Multilateral Processes, and Investments for Water.

This is the moment for the water community to step up and advance water's role in delivering on the UN's core mandate: peace. This policy brief argues that peace is the thread unifying all six dialogues, placing water squarely within the UN's purpose to maintain international peace and security, foster friendly relations among nations, promote sustainable development, and uphold human rights.

Water is far more than a technical, environmental, or development concern. It is a human right and a necessary condition for life, dignity, public health, livelihoods, and social cohesion. It is also deeply political. When governed equitably and sustainably, water can support

legitimacy, trust, cooperation, and shared prosperity. When withheld, polluted, overexploited, or weaponized, water becomes a source of exclusion, fragility, and suffering. Forward-looking thinking on water beyond the 2030 Agenda – now reinforced through the [Pact for the Future](#) and in particular its actions 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, and 18 – signals increasing awareness that water underpins sustainable development, social cohesion, and international stability.

In adopting a broader understanding of “positive peace,” this brief acknowledges plural understandings of peace – including relational, cultural, and ecological perspectives – that have the potential to enrich global water governance. Against this backdrop, the brief calls for translating the political recognition of “Water for Peace” into concrete institutional, legal, financial, and diplomatic action. Across the six interactive dialogues, the brief identifies distinct but mutually reinforcing entry points for action.

KEY MESSAGES



ID A: WATER FOR PEOPLE

Protect water from armed conflict to protect civilians.

Protecting equitable access to WASH services, especially in conflict settings, is essential to safeguarding civilians, restoring dignity, and reinforcing state legitimacy.



ID B: WATER FOR PROSPERITY

Share water's benefits to build social cohesion, not grievance.

Water-driven economic development must be governed inclusively and equitably so that shared benefits strengthen social cohesion rather than deepen inequality and grievance.



ID C: WATER FOR PLANET

Govern water equitably to reduce fragility and sustain climate security.

Context-sensitive, climate-resilient water governance reduces fragility and supports stable, sustainable societies.



ID D: WATER FOR COOPERATION

Share water equitably to prevent conflict and foster social cohesion.

Inclusive, rules-based transboundary water governance can function as a tool for preventive diplomacy, reducing tensions and enabling durable and effective cooperation between states and communities.



ID E: WATER IN MULTILATERAL PROCESSES

Embed water in global frameworks to strengthen conflict prevention, management and resolution.

Systematically integrating water into peacebuilding, climate-security, and multilateral frameworks strengthens coherence in preventing and managing conflict. Water must be more explicitly integrated into the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security agendas.



ID F: INVESTMENTS FOR WATER

Reduce risk and strengthen resilience through peace-positive water investments.

Conflict-sensitive and inclusive water financing, and in particular water infrastructure financing, can help avoid grievances, de-risk investments, and contribute to long-term social stability.

Taken together, the brief offers a clear message to UN Member States: the 2026 UN Water Conference is a strategic opportunity to place water at the center of what the world needs most – peace – and to develop the agenda to get us there.

1

BACKGROUND

The 2023 United Nations (UN) Water Conference marked a watershed moment, as it was the first UN conference focused on water in almost half a century. Building on this momentum, and given that the world is still largely off track to meet Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) on water and sanitation, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) decided in its [resolution 78/327](#) to convene the 2026 UN Water Conference. Co-hosted by the Republic of Senegal and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Conference will be held in the UAE from 8 to 10 December 2026. After extensive consultations during the preparatory process, the co-hosts proposed the following interconnected themes (also referred to as interactive dialogues, or “IDs”). The UNGA adopted these themes by consensus on 9 July 2025:¹

- **ID A: Water for people:** the human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies;
- **ID B: Water for prosperity:** valuing water, water-energy-food nexus, advancing integrated and sustainable water resource management, wastewater and water-use efficiency across sectors, and economic and social development;

- **ID C: Water for planet:** climate, biodiversity, desertification, environment, source to sea, resilience and disaster risk reduction;
- **ID D: Water for cooperation:** transboundary and international water cooperation, including scientific cooperation, and inclusive governance;
- **ID E: Water in multilateral processes:** Sustainable Development Goal 6, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and beyond, and global water initiatives;
- **ID F: Investments for water:** financing, technology and innovation, and capacity-building.

In addition to the six interactive dialogues, eleven cross-cutting issues were highlighted, including “Conflict Prevention and Peace.”

This brief is intended to support UN Member States in their efforts to position water as a catalyst for peace and a tool for conflict prevention at the 2026 UN Water Conference. It does so by critically reviewing the six interactive dialogues and the Note by the Secretary-General of the Conference² through a “peace lens.” As illustrated in figure 1, we propose placing Water for Peace at the center of all the interactive dialogues, as it is directly relevant to each of the six themes as well as to the eleven identified cross-cutting issues. From

¹ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4084926?ln=en&v=pdf>.

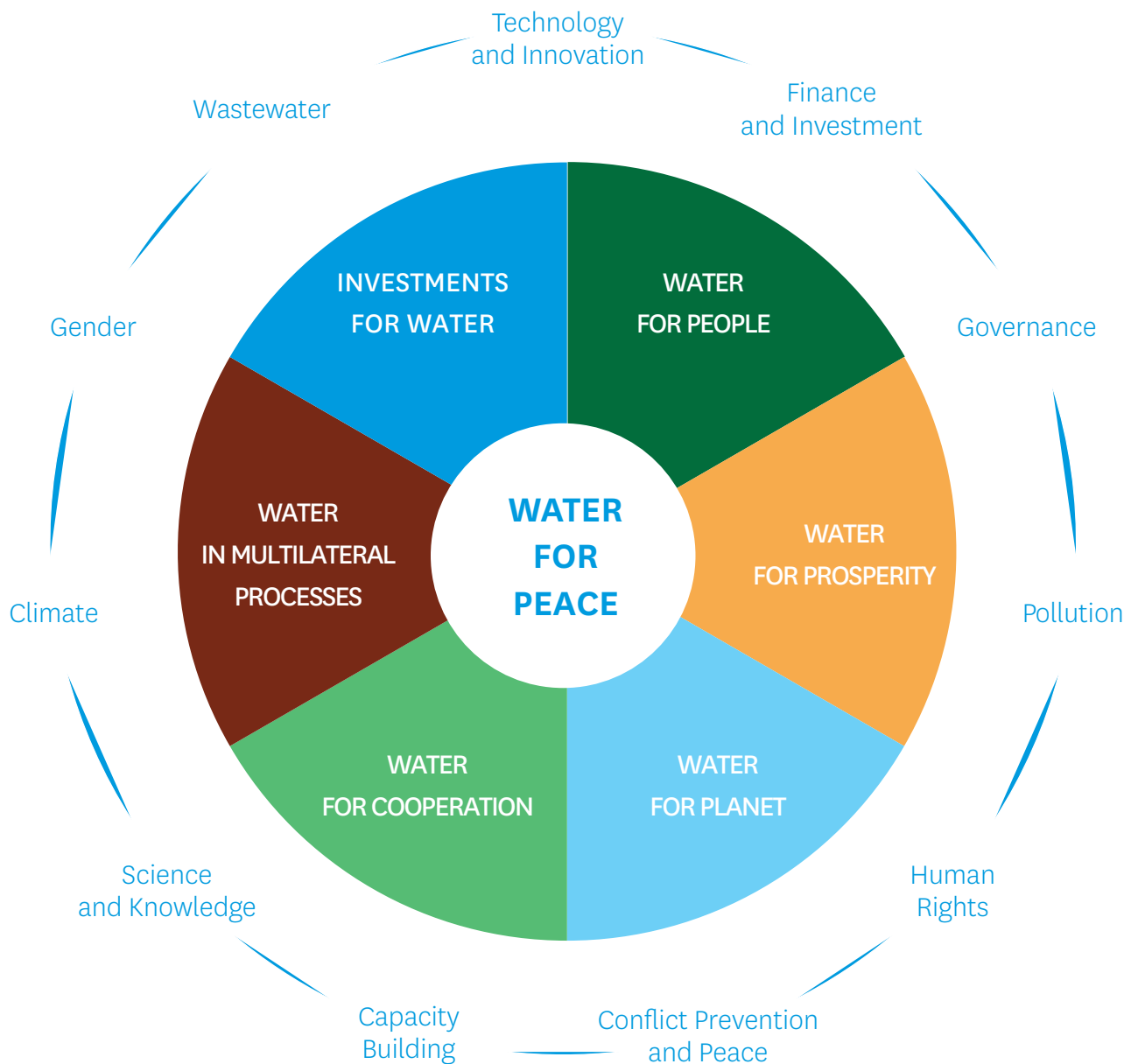
² [Note by the Secretary-General of the Conference](#) dated 9 July 2025.

this central position, Water for Peace should further serve as the unifying thread running through the entire Conference, **consistent with the UN's core mandate to maintain international peace and security.**

Importantly, the 2026 UN Water Conference marks a pivotal moment for the future of global water governance and presents a critical opportunity for Member States to demonstrate leadership and ambition. As the storm of global uncertainty intensifies – driven by conflict, climate disruption, and compounding crises – states must move beyond reactive responses and navigate

with conviction. **Every human being on this planet has the right to live a dignified life, and that dignity begins with water.** To ensure that right, governments must redouble their efforts and steer toward peace through water. Real strength comes from the **courage not to lose hope: by joining forces, advancing international cooperation, and insisting that water be shared equitably as a foundation for peace.** And it requires **calling out – clearly and without hesitation – those who deliberately withhold or weaponize our most precious resource for political gain.**

Figure 1: Water for Peace at the Centre of the Interactive Dialogues



2

CONTEXT

The nexus between water and peace is often framed through the dichotomy of conflict and cooperation, but this perspective captures only part of the picture. Water shapes the conditions for peace in far broader ways (Turley et al., 2025; Döring & Kim, 2025). It is a human right, fundamental to human dignity and essential for social cohesion; it shapes cultural identity and contributes to collective well-being, providing opportunities to build fair governance and shared prosperity. Beyond its biophysical and life-sustaining qualities, water connects communities, sustains livelihoods, and supports practices and rituals that reinforce social bonds.

Water is a matter of survival. That is precisely why its deliberate deprivation becomes one of the most brutal tools of exclusion and harm. Across the world, water reflects both the best and the worst of humanity: when shared equitably and used sustainably, it sustains life, dignity, and peace; when weaponized, used unsustainably, or denied, it becomes an instrument of suffering and control (Zeitoun, 2023). Protecting water and ensuring equitable access are therefore fundamental to advancing Water for Peace.³

Amid the highest number of conflicts and people displaced across borders since the founding of the United Nations (Guterres, 2025), renewed attention to water’s role in relation to peace is needed more than ever. At least since 2024 – the UN year centered on the theme “Leveraging Water for Peace” – Water for Peace has been firmly established on the international policy agenda.⁴ The challenge now lies in translating this recognition into practice and integrating it into long-term political processes. **Key challenges** include, alongside the general **implementation of SDG 6 and SDG 16, the decline in official development assistance (ODA) to the water sector** (OECD, 2025), the **weaponization of water** in armed conflicts, the continued **rise in global military expenditure** (Liang et al., 2025), **growing mistrust in multilateralism** paired with uncertainty around established **international norms and laws**, and the **shift from human security to hard security**. These trends underscore the urgency and relevance of examining water through a peace lens as we approach the 2026 UN Water Conference.

The two SDGs most directly associated with water and peace – SDG 6 and SDG 16 respectively – are

³ A decade ago, 15 countries sharing a common vision to “use water for peace” established the [Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace](#). Two years later, in 2017, the Panel published the report [A Matter of Survival](#), which set out recommendations on how water can serve as an instrument for peace. These recommendations remain highly relevant today and align closely with the six proposed interactive dialogues of the 2026 UN Water Conference. However, the global context has evolved significantly since the Panel’s work, and many of its recommendations have yet to be fully implemented.

⁴ Already in 2023, the policy brief [Missing the “Peace” Piece of the Water Puzzle](#), produced by the Global Observatory for Water and Peace ahead of the 2023 UN Water Conference, demonstrated the importance of fundamentally rethinking the global community’s approach to water as a vehicle for peace.

not on track (UN-Water, 2023; UNDP, UNODC, and OHCHR, 2024). Progress on both remains uneven, fragile, and in many contexts too slow to meet the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. This lack of progress has profound implications for the implementation of the Agenda as a whole. SDG 6 lies at the heart of the sustainable development framework, as nearly all other SDGs depend in one way or another on water. SDG 16, in turn, is central to the Agenda's overarching vision of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. As of 2024, 2.2 billion people lacked safely managed drinking water, 3.4 billion had no access to safely managed sanitation, and 1.7 billion were without basic hygiene services at home (UNSD, 2024). At the same time, civilian deaths in conflict have surged since 2022, with one life lost every 12 minutes in 2024 (UNDP, 2025). Armed conflict has immediate and devastating impacts on water

quality, availability, access, and service provision, often resulting from the deliberate targeting or collateral destruction of water infrastructure (Zeitoun & Talhami, 2016; Schillinger et al., 2020). Evidence further shows that children under the age of 15 living in conflict-affected areas are nearly three times more likely to die from diseases linked to unsafe water and sanitation than from direct violence (UNICEF, 2023). Moreover, there has been a marked rise in the weaponization of water amid escalating armed conflicts, where critical infrastructure has been attacked, destabilized, and even polluted, leading to catastrophic impacts on already vulnerable populations (Kulkarni, 2024). These trends underscore the inextricable links between access to water, human dignity, and the prospects for positive peace.

POSITIVE PEACE

POSITIVE PEACE is defined as the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. Unlike negative peace, which is merely the absence of violence, positive peace focuses on the underlying factors that foster long-term stability, justice, and harmonious relationships within societies. This concept, introduced by Johan Galtung, addresses not just stopping violence but also eliminating social injustices and inequalities at their roots.

For this policy brief, when referring to peace, we largely adopt this definition of positive peace, emphasizing social justice and harmonious social relations. However, we recognize that peace is a complex and multifaceted concept that is difficult to define universally. We also acknowledge and welcome diverse perspectives on peace, including important non-Western views, which offer valuable insights and enrich our understanding of peace in various cultural contexts. For example, concepts of human–water harmony in Chinese scholarship

emphasize balance and co-evolution between human and natural systems, where peace is closely linked to maintaining ecological integrity and social equilibrium (Zuo et al., 2016; Zuo et al., 2020; Turley et al., 2025). In Japan, the idea of *wa* reflects harmony, calm, and social cohesion, including the importance of reciprocal relations between upstream and downstream communities to sustain peaceful coexistence (Cunningham, 2016; Turley et al., 2025). Similarly, Indigenous and reconciliation-oriented perspectives in countries such as Canada and Australia foreground water as part of broader processes of truth-telling, repair, and restoring just relationships between communities and with nature (Bryan, 2021; Castleden et al., 2017; Turley et al., 2025). These perspectives expand the notion of peace beyond institutional arrangements or the absence of violence, highlighting the relational, cultural, and ecological dimensions of how peaceful coexistence is understood and sustained across different contexts.

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The Hawizeh Marsh as a vital source of livelihood to populations on both sides of the political borders. © Camaam

3

WATER FOR PEACE ACROSS THE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUES

This section examines how the theme of Water for Peace can be meaningfully integrated across the six proposed interactive dialogues of the 2026 UN Water Conference. The analysis applies a peace lens informed by the expertise of the Geneva Water Hub, the Pôle Eau Dakar, and TRENDS Research & Advisory. For each dialogue, a section first highlights the peace-relevant dimensions as set out in the annotated interactive dialogue concept outlines.⁵ It then identifies opportunities to further strengthen the use of water for peace, and provides practical recommendations for how UN Member States can advance the use of water as a catalyst for peace at the 2026 UN Water Conference and beyond.

3.1 ID A WATER FOR PEOPLE

PEACE-RELEVANT DIMENSIONS

The co-chairs of this interactive dialogue are **Switzerland** and **Ghana**. The interactive dialogue embeds several peace-relevant dimensions. Its strong focus on human rights – notably the human right to water – equity, and inclusion reinforces the foundations of peaceful societies by addressing structural inequalities. The emphasis on participation, empowerment, and gender equality promotes inclusive governance and social cohesion. The need to strengthen the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus in fragile contexts is acknowledged. As per the annotated outline, actions include: “Creating systems that are resilient to climate change, environmental degradation, natural disasters, and conflict”; “Establishing governance mechanisms that ensure coordination across water, health, education, climate, peacebuilding, and humanitarian systems”; and prioritizing “the water-climate-peace nexus” and “collaboration between development, peacebuilding and humanitarian partners.”

⁵ The annotated outlines of the six interactive dialogue concept papers for the 2026 UN Water Conference build directly on discussions from the Dakar High-Level Meeting in January 2026 and were most recently reviewed at the 43rd UN-Water Meeting in Rome in March 2026 and through online consultations in April/May 2026. Although the final concept papers are expected later in 2026, these annotated outlines offer a solid foundation for the present analysis.

OPPORTUNITIES TO USE AND STRENGTHEN WATER FOR PEACE

The interactive dialogue could further emphasize the political and peacebuilding dimensions of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) by examining how conflict affects water across multiple pathways and over extended timeframes.

1. Before Conflict: Mitigating Tensions and Building Resilience

Building on the dialogue's focus on human rights, inclusion, justice, and equity, there is scope to connect these elements more explicitly to governance and legitimacy (Krampe et al., 2021). Inequities in WASH access are not only humanitarian or development challenges but also political indicators of state capacity and social contract performance. **Uneven service provision can undermine trust and fuel perceptions of injustice, while equitable, inclusive, and accountable water governance strengthens legitimacy and social cohesion.** In both national and transboundary contexts, promoting the Human Right to Water as a framework for cooperation can help establish shared obligations for equitable access and allocation, non-discrimination, and participation, transparency and information-sharing – including access to remedies – thereby fostering basin-level stability (Tignino et al., 2025; ACHPR/Res.300(EXT.OS/XVII)2015; UN-Water, 2026; African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019).

These dynamics are further shaped by intersecting inequalities, particularly gender. As recent evidence shows, women and girls disproportionately bear the burdens of water insecurity while remaining structurally underrepresented in water governance, with exclusion compounded by intersecting factors such as indigeneity, disability, age, and rural or informal settlement status (Kebebew et al., 2026; Kaelin et al., 2025). Addressing these intersectional barriers is therefore central to strengthening legitimacy and resilience not only before conflict emerges, but also during and after.

Water insecurity and land disputes are factors that increase the risk of conflict and forced migration. Regions hosting displaced populations face competition for water resources, environmental degradation, and inequalities in water access costs. Yet the presence of displaced populations and refugees also presents opportunities for socio-economic development by accelerating the roll-out of basic services and integrating new professional skills. As such, it is essential to incorporate the interactions between water and migration into policies for the protection of displaced populations and water governance. In rural settings, water points are a key enabler of access to natural resources and land. They therefore constitute a crucial space for negotiating resource-sharing between host communities and displaced populations. Strategies aimed at reinforcing social cohesion should draw on the potential of water points: first, by improving their technical and management challenges with a focus on marginalized groups; and second, by fostering new bonds between communities through water-sharing mechanisms. Reinforcing social cohesion through water cooperation is especially relevant in contexts where host and displaced populations live close to conflict zones, in order to prevent security spillovers triggered by tensions over water distribution.

2. During Conflict: Upholding Law and Protecting Civilians

The dialogue must underscore the indispensable nature of the human rights to water and sanitation as prerequisites for the realization of all other human rights. It must also reaffirm the obligation to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, including water systems, under International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Armed conflicts directly and indirectly degrade water quality, quantity, and access (Schillinger et al., 2020; Zeitoun & Talhami, 2016). Deliberate attacks on water infrastructure violate clear legal prohibitions. **The reverberating effects of weaponizing water are often reasonably foreseeable, meaning the resulting civilian harm is preventable** (GWH, 2024). Bridging the gap between legal frameworks and compliance requires raising awareness of both these impacts and IHL's protections. **Upholding an “essential service approach” and fostering sustained collaboration**

across humanitarian, development, and peace actors are critical to enhancing systemic resilience (ICRC, 2015).

3. After Conflict: Restoring Dignity

As the environmental peacebuilding literature suggests, positioning equitable WASH services as “peace dividends”⁶ can help rebuild social cohesion and state legitimacy after conflict (UNICEF, n.d.; Conca, 2002). However, research on post-conflict water management, such as Krampe’s analysis of Kosovo, shows that treating water service delivery merely as a technical task can inadvertently entrench divisions and weaken local ownership when underlying political dynamics are overlooked. In Kosovo, international actors approached water as a technical problem, resulting in separate water governance structures that consolidated societal separation rather than bridging it, and bypassed meaningful engagement with local stakeholders, thereby limiting the contribution of water service provision to durable peace. To strengthen peacebuilding outcomes, states should therefore adopt water strategies that are politically informed. This means strategies that proactively engage conflict-affected stakeholders, address sources of grievance, and integrate water governance into broader processes of reconciliation, inclusion, and state legitimacy (Krampe, 2016).

4. In Protracted Conflict: Confronting Pernicious Problems

Protracted crises, where acute humanitarian emergencies compound development challenges, demand integrated action. The dialogue must explicitly address the systemic “pernicious problems” that accelerate service collapse: **inadequate water resource governance; competition from unregulated alternative providers that undermines public networks; the paralysis of complex treatment plants; unsustainable energy costs** from off-grid generation; and severe cashflow crises where costs soar while revenues plummet (WB, ICRC & UNICEF, 2021). Addressing these interconnected challenges requires **coordinated humanitarian-development partnerships from the outset**, supporting state

providers with emergency preparedness while building long-term operational and financial resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Comply with human rights obligations and adopt a human rights-based approach to water and sanitation.** States should meet their obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill these rights without discrimination, ensuring equitable access, addressing inequalities, and strengthening governance and accountability. Authoritative guidance, including the [UN-Water Policy Brief: Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach to Water, Sanitation and Environmental Action 2026](#) and the [African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights Guidelines on the Right to Water in Africa](#), provides practical direction for implementation. This approach should also guide transboundary water cooperation, promoting equitable and reasonable use and supporting basin-level peace and stability.
2. **Respect and ensure respect for International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law to protect water and other critical infrastructure in all circumstances.** Protection efforts must fully account for the foreseeable reverberating effects of weaponizing or targeting water so as to prevent civilian harm. **States should also establish a dedicated mechanism to monitor, document, and report damage or destruction of water systems**, drawing on models such as the WHO’s Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care (SSA).
3. **Support the [Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts](#) in its mission to protect water infrastructure and human dignity.** Integrate the guidance of the [Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructure](#) into relevant policies, operational practices, training, and advocacy efforts.

⁶ Peace dividends refer to tangible and visible benefits delivered in connection with the cessation of violence or a peace process, such as improved WASH services, that help rebuild trust between communities and authorities, incentivize cooperation, and strengthen social cohesion and the social contract.

- 4. Invest in resilient and inclusive water governance and infrastructure to ensure reliable, safe, and equitable access to water and sanitation (WASH) in the context of climate change, rapid urbanization, and crises.** This requires strengthening both physical systems and institutional capacities, ensuring meaningful decision-making power for women and marginalized groups at all levels, and addressing structural barriers and tokenistic forms of participation.
- 5. Advance WASH implementation by building on existing frameworks and tools, including the UNECE-WHO/Europe Protocol on Water and Health, and develop policies and partnerships within the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus** to strengthen the resilience of water and sanitation infrastructure in fragile, conflict, and post-conflict settings.
- 6. Reinforce social cohesion among displaced populations, host communities, and downstream communities affected by upstream water-related interventions through cooperative water governance and dialogue.”.** Benefit-sharing mechanisms for water – whether institutionalized or rooted in traditional practices – are essential tools for peaceful coexistence and conflict-sensitive natural resource management, as demonstrated by [equitable water governance initiatives](#) such as those at Mbera Camp in Hodh Chargui, Mauritania.

WATER, HUMAN SECURITY, AND PEACEBUILDING IN YEMEN

The armed conflict in Yemen has devastated the country’s water systems, turning chronic water scarcity into a severe humanitarian and ecological crisis. The weaponization of water, repeated attacks on infrastructure, and its progressive degradation have left over 17 million people without access to safe drinking water, with consequences including public health crises, food insecurity, displacement, and long-term environmental damage.

As part of a broader effort to address these challenges, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) run Water for Peace projects in several governorates in Yemen, aiming to leverage water to support both

human security and peacebuilding (IOM, 2023; FAO, 2024). These activities include restoring critical water infrastructure, strengthening community-level water resource management, supporting the meaningful participation of women and youth, and reducing conflicts over water.

These initiatives also emphasize capacity building, social cohesion, and long-term stability. By securing essential resources and enhancing cooperation, these interventions illustrate how humanitarian assistance, development, and peacebuilding converge, offering a model for future water-related projects in regions affected by protracted conflict.

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Flooded building after the destruction of the Kakhovka dam, Kherson region, Ukraine 6 June 2023. © A_sm on Adobe Stock

3.2 ID B

WATER FOR PROSPERITY

PEACE-RELEVANT DIMENSIONS

The co-chairs of this interactive dialogue are **China** and **Spain**. The introduction of the annotated outline argues that “achieving economic growth, social equity, and long-term peace requires a fundamental shift toward better valuation, systemic and multisectoral management.” It notes that “water insecurity serves as a threat multiplier, intensifying social tensions, poverty, and political instability,” while “fragmented governance and policy silos across the agricultural, energy, and health sectors” undermine integrated approaches. The conclusion states “that securing the hydrological cycle is not merely an environmental objective but the foundational condition for prosperity and lasting peace, and that the cost of inaction far exceeds the investment required for transformation.” Critically, “water security must be recognized as a central pillar of the post-2030 development framework, with the United Nations system defining water’s role in global architecture for development, climate, and peace.”

OPPORTUNITIES TO USE AND STRENGTHEN WATER FOR PEACE

Water is central to both prosperity and peace. As a cornerstone of agriculture, energy, manufacturing, fisheries, and transportation, it underpins employment, economic growth, and social stability. When guided by principles of equity and inclusivity, joint water initiatives can generate shared value and reduce grievances within and between states. This shift from zero-sum competition to positive-sum outcomes aligns water governance with broader development objectives while strengthening social cohesion (Zhang

& Borja-Vega, 2024). However, when mismanaged through overuse, pollution, or exclusion, water can deepen inequalities, erode trust, and contribute to instability and conflict.

Equitable benefit sharing provides a practical pathway to transform water from a source of competition into a driver of peace. Moving beyond volumetric allocation, it focuses on how the benefits of water use are distributed across society. Well-designed infrastructure, such as dams, wastewater treatment facilities, and irrigation systems, can generate shared economic and social gains if governed inclusively. For example, hydropower dams can support downstream flood control or irrigation, increasing overall social and environmental value and reducing conflict risks, provided inclusive allocation mechanisms guide decisions. The Permanent Water Commission of the Senegal River Basin Development Authority (OMVS) offers a notable example, as it allocates water based on annual hydrological conditions (see box below). As much of the large-scale infrastructure is already in place, the priority is now to optimize existing systems and ensure fair allocation. Such approaches can reduce grievances and strengthen cooperation within and between states.

How water is conceptualized is crucial for policies that seek to harness it for prosperity and peace.

Water is often referred to as a common good, yet diverging interpretations reflect deeper tensions. These differences were evident during the 2023 UN Water Conference and have resulted in contrasting policy recommendations (Vinciguerra, 2024). For instance, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation advocates managing water as a common good under state responsibility, in line with General Comment No. 15 (2002) of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which recognizes water as a fundamental public good essential for life, health, and the realization of all human rights. This framework establishes a clear hierarchy of water uses with direct relevance for peace: water for life – including drinking water, sanitation, local food production, and ecosystem protection – comes first. Water for public interest functions follows, while profit-driven uses rank last due to higher risks of overuse and pollution (A/HRC/57/48). This approach emphasizes

context-specific and just allocation, and highlights risks such as the irrigation paradox, where efficiency gains can paradoxically increase total consumption.

By contrast, the Global Commission on the Economics of Water frames the hydrological cycle as a global common good, emphasizing its interconnectedness and the shared responsibility required to restore and safeguard it. The Commission provides a compelling narrative on how the water cycle is increasingly out of balance and highlights the need for collective global action. It advances policy recommendations that primarily promote economic instruments and seek to mobilize private finance. At the same time, its legitimacy and policy prescriptions have been widely debated (Mukhtarov et al., 2026; Heller et al., 2023; Puy and Lankford, 2024; Linton and Saade, 2024). As an initiative operating outside the United Nations system, supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it has been criticized for a lack of inclusivity and representativeness. Critics further argue that the market-based approaches it promotes risk commodifying water and shifting control toward financial actors. Some also question the

robustness of the scientific grounding underpinning its recommendations, raising doubts about their credibility (Puy and Lankford, 2024; Athénais Georges, 2024).

Finally, water cannot be reduced to economic value alone. It holds cultural, spiritual, and identity dimensions that are essential for social cohesion. Recognizing a plurality of values – including dignity, equity, and environmental justice – supports inclusive governance, fosters legitimacy, and helps prevent conflict (Niasse, 2026; Nagheeby and Amezaga, 2023; Ramawadh et al., 2023; A/HRC/57/48). Infrastructure projects that ignore traditional or customary cooperation mechanisms, or that undermine these values, risk destabilizing communities and eroding social cohesion, as illustrated by the Kariba Dam on the Zambezi (Clements, 1959) and the Bujagali Dam on the Upper Nile in Uganda (Oestigaard, 2019). By building on community-level collaborative arrangements and integrating concepts such as benefit sharing and the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus, water diplomacy can deliver tangible and equitable socio-economic outcomes while contributing to lasting peace and security.



Girl irrigating cabbages in her father's smallholding in West Africa. © Riccardo Niels Mayer on Adobe Stock

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Be explicit and precise in the use of key concepts. Clearly define terms such as “common good” and specify the policy interventions they entail, as this enhances transparency, fosters mutual trust, and supports more effective and inclusive cooperation.
- 2.** Recognize and integrate the multiple dimensions of water’s value in policymaking, ensuring that governance frameworks reflect not only water’s economic importance but also its social, cultural, environmental, and spiritual dimensions. The legal recognition of rivers as rights-bearing entities, as in the case of the Whanganui River, and the protection of culturally significant water sites of Indigenous communities demonstrate how plural value systems can be embedded in governance to strengthen legitimacy, promote inclusive governance and justice, and prevent conflict.
- 3.** Integrate conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding analysis into the planning and implementation of water-related technologies and innovations. This includes applying tools such as stakeholder mapping, distributional impact analysis, and grievance mechanisms to ensure that interventions do not exacerbate inequalities but instead contribute to social cohesion and stability.
- 4.** Complement technological solutions with demand management, sustainability, and a human-rights-based prioritization of water uses, in line with the UN Special Rapporteur’s report A/HRC/57/48. This means prioritizing “water for life” – drinking water, sanitation, food production, and ecosystem protection – before water for public interest functions, and only allocating water to profit-generating economic activities thereafter.
- 5.** Promote equitable benefit sharing through cooperative water governance. Invest in and optimize joint water infrastructure – such as dams, irrigation systems, and wastewater treatment facilities – beyond political borders where feasible, ensuring inclusive and transparent governance to generate mutual gains, reduce grievances, and strengthen regional stability. The OMVS, with its Water Charter and Permanent Water Commission, demonstrates how such arrangements can sustain cooperation even amid inter-state tension.

OMVS'S WATER CHARTER AND PERMANENT WATER COMMISSION (CPE): OPERATIONALIZING IWRM AND THE WEFE NEXUS IN A TRANSBOUNDARY BASIN

Adopted in 2002, the Water Charter of the transboundary Senegal River Basin marked a major evolution in the governance framework of the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River (OMVS). Building on the organization's foundational conventions of the early 1970s, the Charter integrates emerging international norms on sustainable and integrated water resources management, while addressing earlier gaps related to environmental protection and water allocation.

The Charter introduces several forward-looking provisions: water allocation by sector rather than by state; recognition of the human right to water; inclusion of aquatic ecosystems as legitimate water users; support for the annual natural flood regime; and a system of declaration and prior authorization for large-scale water abstractions.

Implementation of these principles is anchored in the Permanent Water Commission (CPE) – a multi-stakeholder advisory body bringing together representatives of riparian states and non-state actors. Using annual hydrological data, the CPE provides a platform for negotiating seasonal water allocation by sector, including the definition of priority uses during low-flow conditions, in line with the Charter's guiding principles (OMVS, 2002; Niasse, 2022).

Together, the Water Charter and the CPE offer a concrete illustration of how Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and what is now widely referred to as the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus can be effectively operationalized in a transboundary context, positioning water not as a source of rivalry but as a foundation for cooperation and shared prosperity.



"Festival A Sahel Ouvert (FASO) - Voix du fleuve, voie de la paix", February 2022 © Fabrice Marrel

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Asian famers gives water to his rice field with his watering can. © Nicole on Adobe Stock

3.3 ID C

WATER FOR PLANET

PEACE-RELEVANT DIMENSIONS

The co-chairs of this interactive dialogue are **Egypt** and **Japan**. Climate-induced disruptions to the global hydrological cycle are causing more extreme shifts between droughts and floods (WMO, 2024). The cascading impacts of severe droughts, water scarcity, flooding, and environmental degradation are likely to translate into greater socioeconomic stress, displacement, humanitarian emergencies, and conflict, particularly where resilience and adaptive capacity are low (Almheiri, 2022). These challenges are exacerbated by the undervaluation of water, as “treating water primarily as an economic input leads to short-term decision-making that intensifies competition among sectors and communities” (Annotated Outline: IDC, 2025, §3.5). Strengthening basin-level governance is therefore essential, as “water systems cross political boundaries and connect multiple sectors of the economy” (§4.9). Responding to these pressures, regions are advancing cooperative strategies to improve water governance and reduce competition. It is thus a key moment to present water as a unifying tool for peace, bringing together environmental, humanitarian, institutional, technological, and development action (Balalaa, 2025).

OPPORTUNITIES TO USE AND STRENGTHEN WATER FOR PEACE

Recent findings from the UNU-INWEH report on global water bankruptcy suggest that the world has moved beyond a state of “water crisis” into a post-crisis condition, in which many hydrological systems can no longer return to historical baselines due to cumulative overuse, pollution, and ecosystem degradation (Madani, 2026). Rather than representing a temporary transgression of a boundary, water systems are

increasingly characterized by irreversibility, systemic decline, and shrinking adaptive capacity. This shift has profound implications for water governance: it calls not only for staying within limits, but for a fundamental rebalancing of expectations, rights, and uses under permanently constrained conditions.

For the Water for Peace agenda, this is critical. Water bankruptcy reframes water not only as a risk multiplier but as a structural driver of fragility, inequality, and potential conflict, particularly where scarcity interacts with weak governance and social exclusion. At the same time, the report highlights water as a strategic entry point for cooperation, noting that investments in water systems can generate co-benefits across climate, biodiversity, food, and health, and can serve as a platform for rebuilding trust and collective action.

Within this broader context, the Planetary Boundaries framework – a risk assessment model that defines a “safe operating space” for humanity across key Earth system processes – has become a dominant narrative for global environmental challenges and has been taken up by influential bodies such as the Global Commission on the Economics of Water (GCEW). However, its application to water remains contested. Some scholars argue that it promotes a “totalizing” crisis narrative that flattens water’s spatial, political, and social complexity into a single global metric, often obscuring uncertainty and normative assumptions (Puy & Lankford, 2024). By framing boundary transgression as an objective and non-negotiable scientific threshold, it risks foreclosing political deliberation and legitimizing technocratic or market-based responses that may override local governance systems.

This tension reinforces the need to move beyond global heuristic frameworks toward context-sensitive, politically aware approaches. A peacebuilding perspective requires strengthening cooperative institutions, negotiating trade-offs transparently, and embedding equity into water allocation and transition processes. Frameworks such as Climate Resilient Water Arrangements (CRESWAs) – developed by the Geneva Water Hub and integrating biophysical realities with socio-political dynamics – offer a promising pathway for designing adaptive and cooperative responses under conditions of increasing scarcity and uncertainty.

Moreover, ecological threats and humanitarian emergencies are becoming more pronounced and affecting more people than ever (OCHA, 2023). The dialogue should raise awareness of the connections between water risk⁷ and humanitarian emergencies, as well as between water risk and ecological degradation. These linkages are increasingly mutually reinforcing, as declining water availability and quality exacerbate food insecurity, health crises, displacement, and social instability, particularly in already vulnerable and conflict-affected contexts. At the same time, the complex pathways through which water acts as a threat multiplier – linking ecological degradation, economic disruption, and social instability – remain insufficiently understood and require further research. Moving forward, there is a need to shift from a predominantly risk-oriented framing toward a more solution-oriented articulation of how water can actively contribute to peace, including through shared infrastructure, joint management, and benefit-sharing mechanisms (Turley et al., 2025).

The growing recognition of water across the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) COP27-COP30 arc parallels earlier developments under the Paris Agreement, where scientific consensus and political momentum enabled the development of implementation frameworks. However, the water bankruptcy perspective underscores that incremental adaptation is insufficient: what is required is a systemic shift from crisis response to long-term “bankruptcy management,” including transparent water accounting, enforceable limits, and the protection and restoration of natural water capital.

Within this context, Water for Peace could be advanced as an integrated operational pillar within the broader Water for Planet agenda. This would involve embedding water-specific targets, indicators, and accountability mechanisms into national planning instruments (NAPs, NDCs, NBSAPs), while ensuring that approaches to valuing water and investing in nature explicitly integrate peace, equity, social stability, and harmony with nature, rather than relying solely on economic metrics. Crucially, as water scarcity becomes structural rather than episodic, governance systems must be capable

of managing distributional tensions and trade-offs in a fair and inclusive manner – a capacity that is central to sustaining peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Advocate for research exploring the links between water and peace across environmental, societal, governance, and economic dimensions,** including agri-food systems, biodiversity, and desertification. Such research should distinguish between hydrological scarcity and socially driven scarcity – inequitable access, governance failures, and power asymmetries – and unpack how structural pressures beyond climate change alone shape risk, resilience, and cooperation potential.
- 2. Adopt frameworks such as Climate Resilient Water Arrangements (CRESWAs)** which integrate biophysical analysis with socio-political assessment to design context-sensitive, risk-literate, and equitable transboundary water arrangements. Within such frameworks, prioritize joint monitoring, shared data, and scientific cooperation as confidence-building tools and politically feasible entry points for cooperation in difficult political contexts.
- 3. Integrate water into the design of climate policies, including national adaptation plans (NAPs) or strategies, nationally determined contributions (NDCs), and associated implementation plans, as well as national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs).**
- 4. Invest in nature conservation and restoration while explicitly accounting for peace, social stability, equity, and the human right to water.** Investment approaches should prioritize long-term ecological integrity and distributive justice, avoiding overly narrow or purely financialized valuation methods that risk overlooking social and governance dimensions.

⁷ The use of the term “water risk” refers to the risk faced by societies and economies as a consequence of physical risks, such as water scarcity, drought, and floods, as well as regulatory risks, such as inadequate drinking water or sanitation. (World Resources Institute (WRI), Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas).

WATER SCARCITY AND INNOVATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East offers an acute illustration of structural water scarcity. With rising heat, extended droughts, and accelerating desertification, water scarcity increasingly threatens agriculture, food production, and the health of communities in the region. Some 19 Arab countries are classified as water-scarce, and 13 fall below the absolute water scarcity threshold (UNESCWA, 2024) – conditions that heighten the risk of political tension and conflict over water resources. Yet the region also demonstrates how cooperative innovation can transform water into a peace asset. The UAE’s Research Program for Rain Enhancement Science (UAEREP) conducts over 900 hours of cloud seeding annually, generating an estimated 84 to 419 million cubic meters of harvestable water at up to 30 times lower cost than desalination (UAE Ministry of Energy & Industry, 2017; UAE Research Program

for Rain Enhancement Science, 2024). Knowledge is shared with Saudi Arabia and Oman, fostering scientific cooperation. The Mohamed Bin Zayed Water Initiative’s XPRIZE Water Scarcity Competition – a \$119 million prize – directly links breakthrough technology to averting humanitarian crises and geopolitical instability (MBZWI, 2025). Jordan’s National Water Strategy promotes non-traditional water sources and targets a 25 percent reduction in non-revenue water by 2040 (Ministry of Water and Irrigation, 2023). Floating solar photovoltaic panels on King Talal Dam reduce evaporative loss and generate renewable power. All of these represent innovative solutions to conditions of increasing water scarcity; yet none can substitute for strong institutions, equitable cooperation, and governance frameworks designed with peace as an explicit objective.

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United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). © United Nations

3.4 ID D WATER FOR COOPERATION

PEACE-RELEVANT DIMENSIONS

The co-chairs for this dialogue are **Finland** and **Zambia**. The introduction of the annotated outline underscores that “in certain contexts, water cooperation can also shape the conditions for peace,” emphasizing that sustained engagement promotes “stability, predictability, and peaceful relations between States.” It highlights that climate change is intensifying water variability, with impacts extending beyond hydrology to livelihoods, migration, and ultimately peace. The Status and Trends section notes that recent global policy processes have elevated water cooperation as a central pillar of sustainable development and climate resilience. The Challenges section recognizes water cooperation as an emerging trend within the climate, peace, and security agenda, with potential for conflict prevention, management, and reconciliation. The Solutions section stresses that water diplomacy can “open space for dialogue” and serve as a confidence-building measure. The conclusion affirms that water cooperation builds trust, prevents conflict, and generates shared benefits essential for sustainable peace.

OPPORTUNITIES TO USE AND STRENGTHEN WATER FOR PEACE

Evidence from Africa shows that functional basin organizations and similar inter-state cooperation mechanisms play a central role in preventing and resolving water-related conflicts and in maintaining peaceful relations among riparian states (Niasse,

2022). This underlines the importance of SDG target 6.5, particularly indicator 6.5.2, which tracks operational cooperation arrangements for transboundary rivers, lakes, and aquifers. Progress on this indicator remains slow: globally, only 59% of transboundary basin areas are covered by operational cooperation arrangements, a figure that has changed little since monitoring began in 2017–2018 (UNECE, UNESCO & UN-Water, 2024). Achieving the 2030 target will therefore require unprecedented efforts. Two priority avenues can accelerate progress.

First, efforts should focus on small transboundary basins. In sub-Saharan Africa, all major basins already have cooperation frameworks: the 12 largest basins account for about 84% of the continent’s transboundary basin area, while the remaining 56 basins –, mostly small –, cover only 16% (Niasse & Malzbender, 2019; McCracken & Wolf, 2019). For these smaller basins, joint or clustered cooperation models, such as the Gambia River Development Organization (OMVG), offer a more viable alternative than basin-specific institutions. Second, greater attention is needed for transboundary aquifers, where cooperation is far less advanced than for surface waters. Limited hydrogeological knowledge and low perceived urgency, especially for deep aquifers, remain major constraints. Nevertheless, initiatives such as the coordinated governance of the Transboundary Aquifer System (STAS) and the planned framework for the Senegal–Mauritania Aquifer Basin (SMAB) provide promising examples.

International law offers an essential normative foundation to guide and strengthen water peacebuilding efforts. In particular, the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes and the Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses provide universally recognized principles for equitable and sustainable transboundary water governance. Together with the human right to safe drinking water, these frameworks support equitable management of water resources in peacebuilding contexts and offer guidance for both short- and long-term strategies (Tignino & Kebebew, 2023). The basic principles of international water law, including equitable and reasonable utilization, the

obligation not to cause significant harm, and the duty to cooperate, can help prevent disputes, foster trust, and promote inclusive governance.

The recognition of the human right to safe drinking water further opens opportunities for international cooperation and assistance and can serve as a guiding principle for structuring transboundary water cooperation at the basin level (Tignino et al., 2025). By promoting inclusion, non-discrimination, and equitable allocation, it strengthens efforts to ensure sustainable and peaceful water governance. However, legal recognition alone is insufficient; effective implementation requires sustained collaboration among states, international organizations, basin institutions, and civil society stakeholders to ensure universal access in line with SDG 6.

Despite its usefulness, indicator 6.5.2 has important limitations. It does not assess the effectiveness of cooperation mechanisms in addressing priority challenges such as infrastructure investment, food security, access to water and electricity, or climate resilience – issues that are often central to sustaining peace. Moreover, the governance frameworks of many basin organizations remain largely state-centric, offering limited space for local authorities, civil society, users, and customary institutions.

There is therefore a need to go beyond indicator 6.5.2 as currently defined. Transboundary cooperation mechanisms should be more inclusive and explicitly tasked with conflict prevention, dispute resolution, and the promotion of peace. Water diplomacy is essential in this regard, not only as an inter-state process, but also as a bottom-up approach rooted in basin identities, local populations, and customary practices of cooperation and conflict resolution (Nagheeby & Amezaga, 2023).

To encourage greater water cooperation at transboundary, intersectoral, and local levels, water diplomacy methodologies and tools should be further explored, based drawing on lessons learned and context-specific driven leaderships. The safe space approach – as a tool to for convening stakeholders and gathering water-related expertise – has shown promising results, such as outlining including identifying new collaboration pathways for collaboration between humanitarian, development, and peace actors, or and

inducing supporting an interstate dialogue towards the concerted management of the Senegal-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin. Innovation in water diplomacy may also support creating the development of bottom-up approaches and local transboundary governance frameworks based on water cooperation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Advance the uptake of transboundary agreements, treaties, and mechanisms, and reinforce international normative frameworks,** including through accession to the 1992 and 1997 UN Water Conventions where appropriate. These and other relevant frameworks should more explicitly integrate benefit-sharing approaches, perspectives from the Global South including Indigenous knowledge systems, and improved indicators to monitor cooperation outcomes beyond resource sharing – including relations among actors, dispute resolution, and social cohesion.
- 2. Leverage SDG indicator 6.5.2 as an operational driver of transboundary water cooperation,** using the reporting cycle not merely as a monitoring exercise but as a practical mechanism to strengthen cooperation through joint bodies, data exchange, and coordinated planning. Particular attention should be paid to institutional practice – not only the existence of agreements – and to closing governance and data gaps on transboundary aquifers, which remain significantly under-reported.
- 3. Harness international water law and the human right to safe drinking water to guide peacebuilding.** The principles of equitable and reasonable utilization, the obligation not to cause significant harm, and the duty to cooperate provide essential guidance for preventing disputes and fostering trust; the human right to safe drinking water can further structure transboundary water cooperation at the basin level by promoting equity, inclusion, and non-discrimination.

- 4. Enhance the effectiveness of water cooperation through capacity building.** This means ensuring that cooperation mechanisms are equipped to meet priority population needs – including food security and access to water and electricity – and that stakeholders can design and implement hydro-diplomatic instruments adapted to local contexts for conflict prevention and sustainable peace.
- 5. Strengthen cooperation on transboundary aquifers as a distinct priority area,** addressing particular needs for improved hydrogeological knowledge, joint monitoring, and tailored governance frameworks. Building on promising examples such as the Senegal-Mauritania Aquifer Basin (SMAB), efforts should support fit-for-purpose cooperation mechanisms for aquifers that complement surface water governance and strengthen long-term regional cooperation.

THE OMVG MODEL AND THE ORASECOM-STAMPRIET AQUIFER: PRACTICAL PATHWAYS TO WIDEN AND DEEPEN TRANSBOUNDARY WATER COOPERATION

Pooling small basins under a single cooperation framework: the OMVG model

The experience of the Gambia River Development Organization (OMVG) demonstrates how small and medium-sized transboundary river basins can be effectively equipped with operational cooperation arrangements. The four OMVG member states – The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal – share three distinct transboundary river basins: the Gambia, the Kayanga-Geba, and the Koliba-Corubal. Individually, these basins are too small to justify separate and fully-fledged coordination mechanisms. By grouping them under a single institutional framework, the OMVG model ensures economies of scale, institutional viability, and coherent planning and investment.

This approach has since inspired similar institutional innovations. In 2018, it was adopted for the creation of the Comoé-Bia-Tanoé Basin Authority (ABCBT), which brings together Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Ghana, and Burkina Faso around three shared river basins. The OMVG model could be replicated across much of Africa, particularly for the approximately 50 small transboundary basins that currently lack operational cooperation arrangements (Niasse, 2022).

Integrating surface water and groundwater governance: the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System and the Orange-Senqu river basin

The cooperation mechanism established for the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System (STAS) provides a compelling example of how transboundary aquifers can be governed in synergy with surface water basins. STAS is shared by Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa and lies entirely within the Orange-Senqu transboundary basin. Basin-level coordination is ensured by the Orange-Senqu River Commission (ORASECOM), within which a dedicated Multi-Country Cooperation Mechanism (MCCM) has been created to ensure the coordinated, sustainable, and conjunctive management of the Stampriet aquifer system (Burchi, 2019; Niasse, 2022). This nested institutional approach – linking aquifer governance to an existing river basin organization – addresses a major gap in transboundary water cooperation, where groundwater often remains invisible or institutionally disconnected.

Key policy insight

Together, the OMVG and STAS experiences illustrate two scalable strategies for accelerating progress on SDG indicator 6.5.2: (i) grouping small transboundary basins under a single cooperation framework, and (ii) embedding transboundary aquifer governance within existing river basin institutions to promote integrated, inclusive, and peace-oriented water management.

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3.5 ID E WATER IN MULTILATERAL PROCESSES

PEACE-RELEVANT DIMENSIONS

The co-chairs of this interactive dialogue are **Germany** and **Mexico**. Recent multilateral developments reflect a growing acknowledgment of water's crucial role for peace and security, as well as the need for a clear global water architecture and more coordinated responses to water challenges. Despite this, the peacebuilding potential of water remains underemphasized. Forward-looking thinking on water beyond the 2030 Agenda – now reinforced through the [Pact for the Future](#) and in particular its actions 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, and 18 – signals increasing awareness that water underpins sustainable development, social cohesion, and international stability. A series of developments in 2024 signal growing momentum around water and peace. These include: the [appointment of a UN Special Envoy on Water](#); the adoption of the [UN system-wide Strategy on Water and Sanitation](#); the designation of “Water for Peace” as the theme of World Water Day 2024; and the release of the 2024 [UN World Water Development Report on Water for Prosperity and Peace](#). This momentum also builds on the 2023 report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, [Water as an Argument for Peace, Twinning and Cooperation \(A/78/253\)](#), as well as past and upcoming UN Water Conferences and the increasing integration of water considerations into the Rio Conventions. These steps strengthen cooperation and institutional engagement, yet stronger inter-agency coordination and clearer links to peace and security are still needed. Beyond the UN system, water has long featured in regional and security-oriented multilateral processes, such as within the OSCE, and is increasingly gaining visibility in global forums, including the Berlin Security Conference, the Munich Security

Conference, the Bled Strategic Forum, and the World Economic Forum, reflecting a broader recognition of water as a strategic issue with implications for peace, stability, and cooperation.

OPPORTUNITIES TO USE AND STRENGTHEN WATER FOR PEACE

Although water is increasingly visible in multilateral fora, its potential to prevent conflict, strengthen governance, and support peace remains insufficiently leveraged. Water still appears primarily within development, humanitarian, or climate narratives, while its relevance to peace and security is less consistently articulated. Addressing this gap is crucial, particularly as water insecurity, weak governance, rising inequality, and climate pressures intersect with geopolitical tensions and growing fragility. Strengthening the peacebuilding dimensions of water in multilateral processes would help ensure that risk factors are identified earlier, that cooperation is fostered more systematically, and that water is recognized as an entry point for stability.

At the UN's most powerful organ in terms of decision-making authority, the Security Council (UNSC), discussions on “Water, Peace and Security” were first initiated by Senegal in [2016](#) through an Arria Formula meeting. Two further Arria Formula meetings, held in [2023](#) and [2025](#), focused on water in armed conflict, highlighting the security implications of attacks on water systems and the need to uphold international humanitarian law. These discussions provided a crucial platform for demonstrating that targeting water infrastructure destabilizes societies, fuels grievances, and undermines the conditions necessary for sustainable peace. Building on this momentum could help embed water more consistently across the work of the UNSC, the Peacebuilding Commission, and other mechanisms that address conflict prevention and resilience. Doing so would also support more coherent approaches between New York and Geneva, especially where human rights obligations and humanitarian concerns intersect with peace and

security considerations.

Strengthening the [UN Climate Security Mechanism \(CSM\)](#) represents another critical opportunity for integrating water into peace and security frameworks. The CSM improves the UN's capacity to analyze climate-related peace and security risks, but water is not yet systematically integrated into its methodologies, advisory services, or support to field missions. Embedding water into risk assessments and into the work of climate, peace, and security advisors would provide a more accurate understanding of how water stress shapes local tensions, affects livelihoods, and influences broader political dynamics. This is particularly important in contexts where climate variability affects already fragile governance arrangements or exacerbates transboundary tensions.

The same logic applies to inclusion. **The Women, Peace and Security ([UNSC Resolution 1325](#)) and Youth, Peace and Security ([UNSC Resolution 2250](#)) frameworks rarely engage explicitly with water, despite water insecurity being a key driver of daily vulnerability, exclusion, and conflict exposure.** At the same time, water governance processes frequently overlook the specific roles that women and youth play in peacebuilding, resilience, and cooperative resource management. This mutual gap between peace architectures and water governance weakens both fields. Addressing it is therefore a structural requirement for effective and durable Water for Peace approaches, given that inclusion in water governance directly shapes legitimacy, stability, and the prospects for sustainable peace.

Regional organizations also play a key role in advancing Water for Peace, as they can provide platforms for coordination, dialogue, and collective action. The African Union's [Africa Water Vision 2063](#) stands out for explicitly recognizing water as a driver of peace and security, including through its call to "integrate water into the African Peace and Security Architecture to prevent conflict and foster peace." This level of political clarity remains relatively rare. While other regional frameworks, such as the European Union's [European Water Resilience Strategy](#), increasingly acknowledge the links between water, resilience, and stability, they tend to do so

in less explicit terms. The African Union's approach therefore provides a useful example for other regional organizations, including the Organization of American States, the European Union, and Mercosur, to more clearly articulate and operationalize the peacebuilding potential of water within their respective governance and security architectures.

With the 2030 Agenda fast approaching its endpoint, there is an opportunity to embed water for peace more firmly within multilateral processes and to strengthen the global water and peacebuilding architecture. To this end, tailored indicators could be developed for elements of any water framework that extend beyond SDG 6 and for peace frameworks that go beyond SDG 16. Such indicators could also be applied at the country level to track progress against national priorities. For example, a water and peace indicator might measure instances in which water has contributed to defusing tensions between communities, between states, or across other actors, based on a clear definition of what it means to use water as a catalyst for peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Promote Water for Peace in multilateral commitments.** Advocate for explicit recognition of water's peacebuilding role in UN resolutions and declarations, explore options for a Security Council resolution on "Water, Peace and Security," and encourage Member States to prioritize commitments to initiatives at the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus.
- 2. Strengthen the [UN Climate Security Mechanism](#) by systematically incorporating water into climate-related peace and security risk assessments, policy guidance, and support for field and peacekeeping missions.** Ensure that policy and financing frameworks recognize water's unique role in social cohesion and conflict prevention beyond climate adaptation.
- 3. Systematically integrate water into the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth,**

Peace and Security (YPS) agendas, recognizing its role as a central element in the implementation of UNSC Resolutions [1325](#) and [2250](#). Ensure that the meaningful participation of women and youth in water governance is embedded in peace processes and recovery frameworks.

4. **Embed Water for Peace across all levels of government** – local, national, regional, and global – by systematically including water considerations in early warning, mediation and peacekeeping mandates, and nationally owned

peacebuilding strategies. Ensure that water for peacebuilding is consistently included on the agenda of UN Peacebuilding Week, and that water-related conflict prevention and cooperation objectives are integrated into regional and national peace and security architectures. The African Union's [Africa Water Vision 2063](#), the [OSCE's](#) long-standing use of transboundary water cooperation as a confidence-building tool and the [EU Water Resilience Strategy](#) all offer useful models in this regard.

THE GROUP OF FRIENDS ON WATER AND PEACE: BRIDGING SCIENCE, POLICY, AND MULTILATERAL ACTION

The Group of Friends on Water and Peace (GoFW&P) exemplifies how water can be leveraged to influence multilateral processes and advance peacebuilding objectives. Established in 2016 at the recommendation of the Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace, the GoFW&P provides an open and informal platform for dialogue, outreach, engagement, and knowledge sharing among states and other stakeholders on water and peace-related issues.

The Geneva Water Hub serves as the Secretariat of the GoFW&P, ensuring continuity, facilitating meetings, and supporting the implementation of initiatives. Since its inception, the GoFW&P has convened over 20 meetings, typically attended by 40–50 Permanent Missions to the United Nations Office at Geneva. These gatherings provide a space to discuss emerging challenges, share experiences, and build consensus on key water and peace issues – bridging the gap between scientific evidence and policy processes.

Beyond regular meetings, the GoFW&P has contributed to international processes through targeted and concrete engagements. For instance, ahead of the 2023 UN Water Conference, the GoFW&P convened a preparatory meeting for Permanent Missions to support informed advocacy on water and peace-related issues during the conference. The platform

has also facilitated exchanges linking Geneva- and New York-based processes, including discussions around the Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts, connecting humanitarian, human rights, and peace-related perspectives. More recently, the UN Special Envoy on Water explicitly recognized the link between water and peace at the latest GoFW&P meeting, reflecting the platform's role in shaping narratives and priorities at the global level.

Through such engagements, the GoFW&P has informed and helped shape multilateral processes, raised awareness of the peace-relevant dimensions of water, and connected actors working on complex issues ranging from transboundary water cooperation to water governance in conflict-affected contexts. Its open-ended membership enables broad participation and cross-sectoral collaboration.

By facilitating dialogue, disseminating knowledge, and linking science to policy, the GoFW&P demonstrates the practical potential of using water to advance peace-oriented outcomes in multilateral settings. Its experience underscores the importance of sustained engagement, continuous knowledge exchange, and flexible, inclusive mechanisms in advancing water diplomacy and peacebuilding agendas.

- 5. Strengthen inter-agency Water for Peace efforts and evidence generation.** Task UN-Water to assess how water is being used in peacebuilding and to periodically present findings to the UN Peacebuilding Commission.

This should be accompanied by capacity building to gather evidence on water-peace linkages, enabling countries to address emerging challenges and anticipate future water risks.

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INVESTMENTS FOR WATER

PEACE-RELEVANT DIMENSIONS

The co-chairs of this interactive dialogue are **South Africa** and **Spain**. Beyond political agreement and policy intent, the goal of ensuring water availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation – SDG 6 – cannot be met without substantial investment in water on a global scale. At present, the investment gap for climate-resilient water infrastructure globally is estimated at around \$6.7 trillion to 2030, while the gap to 2050 is estimated at \$22.6 trillion (GCFC, 2025). As highlighted in the annotated outline, “Investment in water ≈ investment in resilience (reducing future shocks), protection of developmental gains, and lowering long-term fiscal and humanitarian costs.” The annotated outline also stresses the macro-critical impacts of water and the need for integrated, system-wide investment decisions. Emphasizing the non-elective nature of water investment in certain scenarios, the World Bank, ICRC, and UNICEF have argued that greater water and sanitation investments are necessary to prevent systemic collapse, particularly in crisis settings (World Bank, ICRC & UNICEF, 2021). Beyond water infrastructure, investment will also be necessary to implement advances in technology – including AI-enabled solutions – many of which are expected to generate transformative approaches to the challenges of water sustainability and security. Against this background, the dialogue should focus on presenting a comprehensive approach to water investments, encompassing financing, technology, capacity building, and governance as a key tool for peace.

OPPORTUNITIES TO USE AND STRENGTHEN WATER FOR PEACE

On a policy level, explicitly linking investment strategies to conflict-sensitive governance and social cohesion would enhance the potential for water projects to serve as tools for cooperation and peacebuilding. The dialogue should frame water investments as an essential contributor to economic, social, and climate resilience, thereby underscoring the broader value of water beyond basic service provision. Equity considerations demand that the participation of marginalized communities, Indigenous Peoples, youth, and conflict-affected populations be systematically integrated into investment and innovation planning.

Involving the private sector requires an understanding that water investment can be both financially viable and a means of promoting peace and stability. In practice, engagement with the private sector will require the development of practical tools and frameworks. Drawing on the incorporation of environmental and social outcomes in Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) frameworks, similar mechanisms can be designed to incorporate peace outcomes into water investment decisions. Opportunities for mobilizing blended finance, outcome-based funding, and digital tools provide concrete pathways for scaling investment and enhancing accountability. The dialogue should also highlight the role of innovation, digital technologies, and capacity development in improving efficiency, monitoring, and service delivery.

Expertise from organizations with experience in water and peace, such as the Geneva Water Hub, together with international financial institutions like the World Bank, can help design investment criteria and decision-making processes that assess how water-related investments may prevent or exacerbate tensions. This aligns with the World Bank’s emphasis

on system-wide, risk-informed, and climate-resilient infrastructure planning, which requires assessing vulnerability to shocks, avoiding systemic failure, and ensuring equitable and inclusive service delivery under stress (World Bank, 2025). The dialogue should also promote the need for research that clarifies how investments for water can avert conflict and, more specifically, quantify the “peace dividend” resulting from investments in water. Conversely, investment planning must incorporate robust criteria to account for the risk that infrastructure or technological projects could unintentionally exacerbate tensions (for example, by prioritizing certain regions or populations over others).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Embed peace-relevant safeguards into water investment planning by requiring conflict-risk assessments, social cohesion impact screening, and equity analysis for all major water projects, ensuring that infrastructure development does not exacerbate horizontal inequalities or resource-based tensions.
2. Align investment decisions in shared basins with joint infrastructure planning, data-sharing mechanisms, and cooperative management arrangements, thereby reducing the risk that unilateral infrastructure development becomes a driver of tension or conflict.
3. Scale investment in water systems as a foundation for stability by prioritizing resilient service delivery for critical sectors (food, health, and energy) and ensuring that financing strategies explicitly consider water’s role in preventing crisis escalation and supporting recovery in fragile contexts.
4. Mobilize finance in ways that reinforce peace outcomes by expanding blended finance, guarantees, and, where appropriate, public-private partnerships structured to incentivize inclusive service delivery. Investment frameworks should reward projects that strengthen equity, trust in institutions, and long-term social cohesion. Financing approaches should be guided by human rights principles, including timely disclosure of information in accessible formats and access to effective remedies. In transboundary contexts, stable cooperative arrangements are a prerequisite for mobilizing such finance, as they create enabling conditions for donor engagement and long-term basin planning.
5. Prioritize decentralized, modular, and diversified water supply systems to reduce systemic risk and enhance continuity of access during crises. Design and finance water infrastructure (for example, desalination plants, dams, and wastewater reuse systems) in ways that are conflict-sensitive and resilience-oriented, explicitly assessing their vulnerability in armed conflict and ensuring that no single installation becomes a point of failure or a strategic target.

INVESTING IN WATER MEANS INVESTING IN PEACE

The National Water Conveyance Project is the largest infrastructure project in the history of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It is also world-first strategic initiative that integrates several pillars: desalination capacity, pipeline network, sustainability and supply impact. The project will increase the Kingdom's water supply by 40 per cent and is cornerstone to future national water security, and conducive to regional peace. By alleviating Jordan's chronic water scarcity, the project reduces potential competition, dispute and political tensions over shared water resources with neighboring riparian countries.

Government and International Investment: The project brings together an unprecedented level of public, private, and international financing. The Government of Jordan is contributing \$722 million, representing the largest budgetary allocation for a capital project in the country's history, to help reduce the cost per cubic meter. In parallel, 29 donor governments and international financing institutions are providing \$663 million in grants, including contributions from the United States, European Union, Germany, Netherlands, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Japan, and the Green Climate Fund. An additional \$2.9 billion in private sector financing is being mobilized

through a consortium that includes the World Bank Group, European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Islamic Development Bank, Proparco, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Green Climate Fund, and the OPEC Fund for International Development.

Contribution to Regional Peace: The National Water Conveyance Project will contribute to strengthening regional peace by providing a sustainable and secure source of water in Jordan, one of the world's most water-scarce countries. The project also enhances Jordan's water independence, which contributes to strengthening national security and internal stability, and enhancing its capacity to maintain stable regional relations based on cooperation rather than competition over limited resources.

Furthermore, the National Water Conveyance Project supports economic development by providing the water required for various sectors such as industry, agriculture and tourism. This helps attract investment, create jobs and improve economic conditions – factors contributing to achieving stability and peace at both national and regional levels.

Source: Information provided by Eng. Maysoon Zoubi.

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The Disi Water Conveyance Project pipeline pumping water from underneath Wadi Rum to Amman in Jordan. © Eddie Gerald on Pixsmedia

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CONCLUSION

As the international community prepares for the 2026 UN Water Conference, the imperative to position water as a catalyst for peace has never been more urgent. The current trajectory – marked by escalating armed conflicts, deepening inequalities, and serious shortfalls in achieving SDG 6 and SDG 16 – demands a fundamental shift in how we understand water and its governance. Human activity has disrupted the hydrological cycle, creating uneven benefits and burdens. Unsustainable use, pollution, armed conflict, and other pressures further strain water resources. When contamination or overexploitation becomes irreversible, water may no longer be able to sustain human life. Since we are all connected through this cycle, addressing these challenges requires collective responsibility and action. Recognizing both its life-sustaining and socially shaping roles, while calling out, addressing, and acting against its misuse and inequitable distribution, allows water governance to advance peace in a holistic and enduring way.

Our analysis confirms that each of the **six interactive dialogues provides distinct and ample opportunities to mainstream and advance Water for Peace.** Crucially, this brief has equipped Member States with concrete, actionable recommendations for each dialogue. In **ID A (Water for People)**, the **core objective must be to ensure equitable water and sanitation access at all times, including during armed conflict.** This requires a steadfast

commitment to the full spectrum of international legal frameworks – encompassing human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL) – to protect civilians, uphold the human right to water, and safeguard critical infrastructure from attack. Complementing this, **ID B (Water for Prosperity) calls for conflict-sensitive benefit-sharing mechanisms grounded in a human-rights-based approach that prioritizes vital human needs over other water uses,** ensuring water-related projects prevent harm, address inequities, and advance social justice. **ID C (Water for Planet)** underscores the need to employ **ecological resilience and transparent data-sharing as tools for stability,** mitigating the environmental drivers of displacement and tension. The foundation for equitable cooperation is laid in **ID D (Water for Cooperation), which highlights inclusive transboundary governance as a form of preventive diplomacy,** transforming shared basins from potential flashpoints into zones of collaboration. To ensure these efforts are effective, **ID E (Water in Multilateral Processes)** must ensure that **water remains a global priority while also integrating water considerations into global peace and security architectures,** embedding water more firmly within peacebuilding and peacemaking, mediation, and climate security frameworks. Finally, to make this vision a reality, **ID F (Investments for Water)** must direct **finance, technology, and innovation explicitly toward building social cohesion and**

climate resilience, prioritizing investments that are equitable, decentralized, and peace-positive.

The collective implementation of these measures provides a clear roadmap. It requires that water governance be anchored in the mutually reinforcing frameworks of international law to protect water access and freshwater ecosystems universally. The 2026 Conference represents a decisive moment to translate this political agenda into enduring commitments, ensuring that water's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding is systematically funded and operationalized across the multilateral system. Ultimately, water must be governed in ways that limit harm to people and the environment, address inequalities, and contribute to the conditions for

peace within and across societies. Ensuring equitable water sharing, protecting water from pollution and the impacts of armed conflict, and upholding human dignity are fundamental to responding to today's interconnected challenges.

Peace is the core purpose of the United Nations, and we cannot leave the potential of water for peace untapped in a world that urgently needs stability, justice, and dignity for all. Let us therefore seize the opportunity of the 2026 Conference to act decisively and together, leaving no one behind and placing water at the center of a more equitable, just, and peaceful future.



Piers of traditional water taxi boats in Dubai, UAE. © oleg_p_10oon on Adobe Stock

ABOUT THE PARTNER INSTITUTIONS



The Geneva Water Hub (GWH) is a Center of Competence on Water for Peace based out of the University of Geneva and the Geneva Graduate Institute. Established in 2015 by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the GWH pursues the roadmap laid out in the report of the

Global High-Level Panel of Water and Peace “A Matter of Survival”. The GWH’s mission is to advance the use of water for peace in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. Our experience has shown that when water is shared equitably, and spared from war and pollution, peace can prevail.



The Pôle Eau Dakar, a flagship initiative of the Senegalese Ministry of Water and Sanitation, is grounded in the mission to promote water diplomacy to foster collaborative, integrated, responsible, and inclusive governance of water resources in the

service of peace and shared prosperity. By bridging knowledge and networks, it functions as “a catalyst for hydrodiplomacy” aiming to evolve as a platform for exchange, foresight, and proposals serving Senegal, West Africa, and the African continent.



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the gap between research and practice by delivering high-quality studies, policy recommendations, and strategic assessments tailored to the unique needs of our partners, government institutions, and private sector organizations. As part and the core of TRENDS Group, we are committed to fostering innovation, advancing knowledge, and contributing to a deeper understanding of emerging challenges and opportunities in an increasingly complex world.



The Itaipú Hydroelectric Dam, the largest operational hydroelectric energy producer in the world is located on the border between Brazil and Paraguay. The plant is operated by Itaipú Binacional, with 90% of its energy output going to Brazil © UN Photo/Mark Garten

Photo credits.

Cover photo: Valentin Flauraud for Saype. An aerial view shows a giant landart fresco by French-Swiss artist Saype, painted for the 10th step of his worldwide “Beyond Walls” project on the beach in Ouidah, Benin, on Monday March 8, 2021.

P.4: Jubail Mangrove Park in Abu Dhabi. © malangusha on Adobe Stock

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