



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (HLPF 2026)

Report

7-15 July 2026

Multi-stakeholder Partnerships
to Accelerate SDG 6 through
Water Transversality

INDIA
Water
FOUNDATION

Report, 7–15 July 2026

A man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a grey suit, is seated at a conference table. He is looking towards the camera. In front of him is a black nameplate with the text "USG DESA" in blue. A glass of water is on the table to his left. The background is dark and out of focus.

Agenda commitments but was marked by last-minute political battles over climate language. Notably, the G77/China successfully removed a paragraph citing the COP28 “UAE Consensus” on fossil fuel transitions, a change opposed by the EU/Western bloc. The final Declaration thus took a cautious tone: it calls for science-based action and poverty eradication, affirms the Paris goals and water rights, and urges partnerships (SDG17), but stops short of explicitly endorsing specific fossil-fuel phase-out timelines. Member State speeches revealed deep divides: many developing countries insisted any climate action language align with UNFCCC principles (CBDRRC), while most advanced economies pressed for stronger language on energy transition and lamented dilution of gender/climate commitments.

Official Outcomes and Ministerial Declaration

The primary outcome of HLPF 2026 was its negotiated Ministerial Declaration. Presented in closing plenary on 15 July, the 65-paragraph Declaration was adopted by acclamation after contentious votes on specific paragraphs. Its three sections cover (1) current trends and challenges, (2) priority actions – including sub-sections on each SDG under review and means of implementation –

and (3) praise for VNRs. While all Member States voted in favour of the final text, several



recorded explanations to clarify reservations. Notably, the Group of 77 and China (led by Uruguay) argued that the SDG7 section should not cite specific UNFCCC outcomes and thus proposed deleting the reference to the COP28 “UAE Consensus” on energy transition. After intense debate, the amendment passed by majority vote (82 in favor, 54 against, 12 abstentions), removing that reference. Western countries (e.g. Ireland on behalf of the EU) had urged retaining the UAE Consensus wording as a vital milestone, but saw it stripped from the text. Similarly, several delegations called for deletion of a paragraph on conflict impacts, which was ultimately retained after a vote.

Despite these contentions, the adopted Declaration emphasizes collective action and reaffirms commitments to the 2030 Agenda. It recalls that poverty eradication and hunger elimination are the “greatest global challenge” and “moral imperative”, calls for access to water, energy and urban services, and pledges acceleration of action with science-based solutions. SDG-specific paragraphs reaffirm existing targets (e.g. clean water, renewable energy, sustainable cities) and commit to strengthening partnerships (SDG 17) for follow-up. The Declaration notably underscores the 2024 HLPF declaration on climate ambition and the Paris Agreement temperature goal, but it avoids endorsing any particular new time-bound commitments beyond existing SDG targets. References to UNFCCC bodies and principles are carefully balanced: for example, one speaker noted that climate action “must be implemented in full accordance with UNFCCC, including CBDR-RC, and with adequate means of implementation”. Overall, stakeholders judged the Declaration modest, providing political impetus but no new binding obligations.

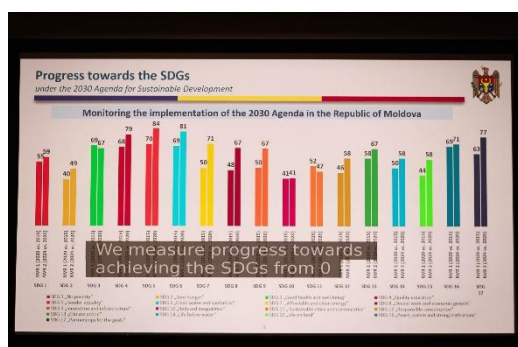
Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs): Highlights and Trends

Thirty-six countries presented VNRs in 2026, reflecting a diverse range of development contexts (see Table below). There were no first-time presenters; about half were LDCs/MICs (e.g. Burundi, Sudan, Rwanda, Mozambique) and others were larger economies (Brazil, Egypt, Italy, etc.). The compiled main messages of these VNRs (UN note E/HLPF/2026/5) show common themes: many governments framed their reports as “the final stretch to 2030,” prioritizing reforms and investments for accelerated action. For example, Algeria’s VNR emphasized inclusive growth, efficient institutions, and “sovereignty over development pathways,” while advocating a fairer global system. Bahrain highlighted knowledge and skills development and unveiled a national energy strategy aiming for net-zero by 2060. Brazil’s report featured a proposal to “radicalize” inclusion and tax justice through a comprehensive National Care Plan, making care a right in social policy. Italy’s VNR stressed innovation in governance, youth empowerment and territorial planning as drivers for sustainability. These VNRs often reported sound macroeconomic management and poverty reduction, but also flagged financing gaps (debt burdens, fiscal space) and climate impacts as key challenges.



Each VNR presentation at HLPF involves a national delegation followed by an interactive dialogue with peers. Countries commended each other’s progress: Egypt’s fourth VNR, for example, noted stable GDP growth and poverty decline but was questioned by NGOs on debt servicing and energy costs. Rwanda’s presentation highlighted rural infrastructure gains and gender progress; the Women’s Major Group commended these but urged new policies on care work and CSO space. A common follow-up from VNR discussions was a request for more technical assistance and finance: for instance, Bosnia’s Minister of Finance explained how he

aligned all financing sources through an Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) to meet SDG spending needs. In sum, the VNRs illustrated that while political commitment remains high, implementation gaps persist in financing, data, and capacity. Table 1 below compares highlights from a sample of 2026 VNRs.



Thematic Reviews (SDGs under Review)

HLPF 2026 conducted in-depth reviews of SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11, and 17. Key messages from those sessions underscored common challenges and solutions. For SDG 6 (Water & Sanitation), participants stressed integrating water management into urban and agricultural planning, prioritizing human rights and participatory governance, and scaling technologies for efficiency. The SDG 7 (Clean Energy) review

highlighted the urgent need for an “equitable and just” energy transition: expanding clean energy access, improving energy efficiency, and supporting emerging economies to reduce fossil fuel dependence. For SDG 9 (Industry & Innovation), delegates called for mission-oriented industrial policies and public-private partnerships to build resilient infrastructure and local manufacturing, stressing technology transfer and value-chain upgrading. The SDG 11 (Cities) session emphasized inclusive urban planning, stronger local governance, and investment in housing and services; integrated transport and circular economy approaches were cited as ways to make cities safer and more sustainable. Finally, the annual SDG 17 (Partnerships) segment urged bolstering multistakeholder coalitions: enhanced data-sharing, financing commitments, and stakeholder engagement (including youth, parliamentarians, and private sector) were identified as critical for revitalizing the global partnership. In sum, the thematic reviews reiterated that the reviewed goals are off-track and require mainstreaming into national plans and budgets. They provided evidence-based recommendations (e.g. scale up water reuse, expand renewables, foster innovation hubs) which the Declaration referenced as “priority actions” for accelerated implementation.

Major Commitments and Announcements

While the HLPF is not primarily a venue for headline announcements, some notable pledges and initiatives were linked to the Forum. In preparatory events, the 2026 SDG Report was launched (7 July), warning that only half the targets are showing moderate or strong progress. In SDG7 discussions, speakers referenced recent climate commitments: at COP28 (Dubai) countries agreed to triple renewable energy capacity and double the global rate of efficiency improvement by 2030, along with a “just, orderly, equitable” energy transition pathway. Brazil and UAE delegates invoked these pledges as context. Indeed, the UAE speaker noted that the COP28 “UAE Consensus” offered an internationally agreed roadmap relevant to SDG 7, though that reference was ultimately removed from the HLPF text. No single overarching finance pledging framework was launched at HLPF 2026; rather, countries and institutions reiterated existing initiatives. For example, several speakers cited the importance of scaling up climate finance and official development assistance, and forums on sustainable finance took place in parallel. In side events, the private sector flagged commitments to innovation: industrial stakeholders discussed mobilizing green investment for infrastructure (e.g. UNIDO workshops on resilient industries). Overall, participants frequently echoed calls for “tripling renewables” and “leaving



no one behind,” but concrete new numerical pledges (like those seen at climate or finance summits) were absent.

Gaps, Criticisms and Implications for 2030

Despite generally positive language, observers note several gaps in HLPF 2026’s outcomes. Foremost, the pace of progress remains inadequate: as the SDG Report warns, serious headwinds (conflict, climate, debt, slowing growth) threaten to derail many Goals. The Ministerial Declaration acknowledges challenges but largely avoids new financial commitments or enforcement mechanisms. For example, civil society critique centers on the absence of binding actions to address debt distress, tax evasion, or gender inequity. The energy transition language was pared back, reflecting diplomatic compromise rather than accelerated ambition. Some delegates (e.g. the Holy See) pointed out that even the prominence of poverty eradication had to be defended repeatedly in negotiations, suggesting a weakening of foundational commitments. Others lament the lack of clear references to emerging issues like digital governance or the interlinkage of climate security with development. In short, critics say HLPF 2026 reaffirmed existing pledges but fell short of closing the gap to 2030.



These shortcomings have significant implications. With only four years until 2030, the Declaration’s urgings must translate swiftly into action. The Forum’s consensus may provide diplomatic cover for domestic policy changes, but without new targets or accountability, States risk drifting. The contested outcomes also imply that multilateral cohesion is fraying on climate and inequality. Unless countries heed the Declaration’s warnings – and perhaps await stronger push at upcoming UN Summits – many targets will remain out of reach. On the positive side, the HLPF 2026 process (e.g. innovative VNR Labs) and the explicit link made to the forthcoming post-2030 framework signals that this will be a critical inflection point. How seriously governments integrate these messages into their policies over 2027–2030 will determine the Agenda’s legacy.

Recommendations for UN, Member States and Stakeholders



For the UN system: Continue reinforcing data and monitoring tools. The UN should promptly publish the final HLPF 2026 reports and thematic analyses, and incorporate key findings into the Secretary-General’s annual SDG progress reports and the 2026 climate and policy summits. The SDG database and VNR platform must be kept updated to track the highlighted issues (e.g. water and energy access, vulnerable communities). The UN should also support capacity-building for VNRs and

follow up with technical assistance programs on integrated financing and disaggregated data (as many countries requested). Given the urgency, the UN should coordinate with the UNGA to ensure that HLPF outputs feed into the September 2026 High-level Week and into preparations for the 2027 SDG Summit under GA.

For Member States: Incorporate HLPF guidance into national action. Governments should use the Ministerial Declaration and VNR findings as benchmarks for updating their national SDG

plans. This means accelerating policies on clean energy, infrastructure, water management and partnerships as discussed at HLPF. Notably, states should finalize or implement the Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs) mentioned by several countries, to mobilize domestic resources (tax reform, debt relief) and leverage private capital. Donor countries need to increase ODA and climate finance for LDCs, as endorsed in the Declaration. Importantly, political leaders should translate the SDG commitments into measurable targets (e.g. share of renewables, rural poverty rates) and track them transparently. Countries that dissociated from parts of the text (on CBDR, gender or other issues) should clarify in writing how they will nonetheless support the Agenda, to avoid backsliding.

For Stakeholders (Civil Society, Business, Parliamentarians, etc.): Maintain pressure and partnerships. Civil society must hold governments accountable by monitoring budgets and outcomes. Major Groups should use national follow-up mechanisms (parliaments, human rights bodies, indigenous forums) to demand implementation of HLPF commitments. They should also engage in the 2027 VNR process to assess government responses to the 2026 HLPF. The private sector can contribute by aligning investments with the SDGs and publicly reporting progress; corporates and banks, for example, could disclose how their projects contribute to SDGs 6, 7 or 11. Multi-stakeholder partnerships launched at HLPF (such as urban resilience networks or water alliances) should be operationalized. Finally, all actors should prepare for the transition to the post-2030 framework: by broadening participation in defining future goals and by ensuring that lessons from HLPF 2026 (e.g. the need to integrate climate, finance and equity) shape the new agenda.

In sum, HLPF 2026 delivered a clear, if limited, political declaration and showcased valuable national reviews and analyses. To make the “final years count” as urged by the UN Secretary-General, the onus now lies on governments and partners to transform words into action, bridging the identified gaps and using established accountability mechanisms (VNRs, HLPFs, reviews) to stay on course toward 2030.

High level policy dialogue

On

Multi-stakeholder Partnerships to Accelerate SDG 6 via Water Transversality

Organised by India Water Foundation

An Official Side Event of HLPF 2026

Background

As the international community enters the final phase of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the global water sector continues to face mounting challenges arising from climate change, ecosystem degradation, increasing water demand, rapid urbanisation and fragmented governance. Although water is increasingly recognised as central to sustainable development, implementation efforts remain largely compartmentalised across sectors, institutions and financing mechanisms, limiting opportunities for integrated planning and collective action. According to the latest United Nations SDG 6 Synthesis Report, progress towards universal access to safe water and sanitation remains inadequate, with significant disparities persisting across countries and regions. Against this backdrop, there is growing recognition that achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 requires moving beyond

traditional water management towards integrated governance models that position water as the connecting element across food systems, energy transitions, public health, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, disaster risk reduction and economic development.

Recognising this imperative, India Water Foundation organised the High-Level Policy Dialogue on "Multi-stakeholder Partnerships to Accelerate SDG 6 via Water Transversality" as an Official Side Event of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2026. Supported by the International Office for Water (OiEau), International Water Resources Association (IWRA), International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO) and the World Water Council, the dialogue convened senior policymakers, international organisations, multilateral development banks, river basin institutions, academia and development practitioners to deliberate upon innovative approaches for accelerating SDG 6 through integrated governance, collaborative financing and cross-sectoral partnerships.

The dialogue sought to advance the concept of Water Transversality, an emerging governance framework that recognises water as the foundational connector across multiple development systems rather than as an isolated sector. Through the participation of leading international experts and government representatives, the dialogue explored practical pathways for strengthening policy coherence, mobilising finance, enhancing institutional coordination and promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration to build resilient water systems capable of supporting sustainable development.

Session Overview

Dr. Arvind Kumar, President, India Water Foundation

Introducing the conceptual foundation of the dialogue, Dr. Arvind Kumar described Water Transversality as one of the most important governance paradigms required for the coming decades. Welcoming eminent representatives from governments, international organisations, multilateral development banks, river basin organisations and academia, he observed that humanity stands at a decisive moment in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. While global awareness regarding water challenges has undoubtedly increased, measurable progress remains far behind what is necessary to achieve SDG 6 within the stipulated timeframe. According to current global assessments, none of the SDG 6 targets are presently on track, implying that universal sustainable water management may not be realised until nearly two decades after the original deadline. Such delays, he cautioned, represent not merely statistical shortcomings but profound implications for human dignity, economic opportunity and environmental sustainability.



Dr. Kumar highlighted the scale of the contemporary global water crisis through a series of compelling indicators. More than two billion people continue to lack safely managed drinking water services, while less than half of global wastewater receives adequate treatment before being discharged into the environment. Simultaneously, approximately forty-three per cent of monitored freshwater bodies remain in poor ecological condition. The financing challenge is equally severe. Although achieving universal water and sanitation services requires investments estimated at over US\$114 billion annually, current official development assistance remains only a fraction of this requirement. Furthermore, projections indicate that the global water infrastructure investment gap could approach US\$1 trillion by 2030. He

argued that unless governments fundamentally rethink the way water is valued within economic planning and development strategies, these financing deficits will continue to widen.

Moving beyond the diagnosis of existing challenges, Dr. Kumar introduced Water Transversality as a transformative governance approach capable of repositioning water from being viewed as a standalone sector to becoming the organising principle of sustainable development. Water, he explained, functions as the invisible thread connecting agriculture, energy systems, public health, biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, economic productivity and social equity. Consequently, every policy decision concerning food production, industrial development, urban planning, energy generation or environmental conservation simultaneously becomes a water policy decision. He stressed that effective governance therefore requires integrated planning across ministries and sectors rather than isolated interventions confined to individual departments. Drawing upon recent findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and emerging international initiatives such as the Turkish Nexus Initiative, he demonstrated that global scientific consensus increasingly supports integrated nexus-based governance as the only viable pathway for achieving climate resilience and sustainable development.

Dr. Kumar further articulated three fundamental dimensions through which Water Transversality should be operationalised. First, he described water as critical economic infrastructure, arguing that water should no longer be perceived solely as a social good but rather as productive infrastructure underpinning every sector of the economy. Referring to international estimates placing the annual economic value of water ecosystems at nearly US\$58 trillion, he argued that undervaluing water inevitably results in undervaluing future economic growth. Secondly, he characterised water as a geopolitical bridge, observing that rivers and aquifers naturally transcend political boundaries and therefore offer opportunities for regional cooperation rather than conflict. Finally, he emphasised water's central role in social justice, noting that water insecurity disproportionately affects women, marginalised communities and poorer regions, particularly in countries facing severe water stress such as India. By embedding water considerations within poverty reduction, healthcare, agriculture, energy policy and climate adaptation strategies, Water Transversality provides governments with an integrated framework capable of simultaneously advancing multiple Sustainable Development Goals.

Concluding his address, Dr. Kumar called upon governments, development partners, financial institutions, civil society and academia to fundamentally redefine their understanding of water governance. Rather than viewing water as a problem requiring isolated technical solutions, he argued that water should be recognised as the principal enabler of resilient societies, equitable economic development and environmental sustainability. Reliable and equitable access to water, he observed, quietly transforms communities by improving health outcomes, strengthening livelihoods, reducing systemic economic risks and fostering social stability. He expressed confidence that the distinguished panel assembled for the dialogue would generate practical recommendations capable of advancing Water Transversality from an emerging concept into an operational framework for accelerating SDG 6 implementation worldwide.



Shri Amit Kumar Ghosh, Additional Chief Secretary, Government of Uttar Pradesh

Delivering the keynote governmental perspective, Shri Amit Kumar Ghosh emphasised that the concept of Water Transversality extends far beyond the boundaries of environmental management and should fundamentally be viewed as a framework for advancing human well-being, public health, economic resilience and sustainable development.

Speaking from the perspective of a public health administrator, he observed that water is not merely a natural resource but one of society's most powerful preventive healthcare interventions. Safe and equitable access to water determines maternal health outcomes, child survival, nutritional security, disease prevention, educational attainment and overall economic productivity. Consequently, achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 simultaneously contributes to the realisation of numerous other Sustainable Development Goals, making water one of the most cross-cutting development priorities of the twenty-first century.

Reflecting upon the experience of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, Shri Ghosh highlighted that the Government has progressively shifted away from treating water, sanitation, health, climate and environmental management as isolated administrative sectors. Instead, the State has embraced integrated governance models recognising the interconnectedness of these systems. He referred to several initiatives currently underway, including the sixth edition of the state's month-long communicable disease prevention campaign, which places safe drinking water and sanitation at the centre of disease control strategies. He further explained that the recently launched National One Health Mission by the Government of India provides an important institutional framework for integrating water governance with human health, animal health and ecosystem health. Uttar Pradesh is presently operationalising this vision through the preparation of a comprehensive ten-year State One Health framework that seeks to mainstream environmental determinants of health into long-term public policy.

The speaker further emphasised that Uttar Pradesh's extensive implementation of the Jal Jeevan Mission demonstrates how water infrastructure directly improves social and economic outcomes. With more than 26.6 million rural households now connected to piped drinking water, the programme has significantly enhanced access to safe drinking water, particularly in historically water-stressed regions such as Bundelkhand and Vindhya. However, Shri Ghosh noted that these achievements should not be measured merely in terms of physical infrastructure. They represent a broader transformation involving behavioural change, community participation, improved sanitation practices, groundwater protection and strengthened public health systems. He stressed that reliable water services reduce the incidence of diarrhoeal diseases, maternal infections and childhood illnesses while simultaneously alleviating pressure on healthcare infrastructure and improving overall quality of life.

Addressing future priorities, Shri Ghosh argued that climate change is rapidly reshaping disease patterns through heatwaves, floods, groundwater depletion and changing rainfall regimes, thereby making climate resilience an integral component of public health planning. He highlighted the need to strengthen disease surveillance systems capable of monitoring climate-sensitive diseases while integrating water quality monitoring with health information systems. Medical education, he suggested, must also evolve to equip future healthcare professionals with interdisciplinary knowledge linking epidemiology, environmental science,

public health and climate resilience. Beyond infrastructure investments, he stressed the importance of technology-enabled water monitoring, digital governance, solar-powered water supply systems, community water quality testing and local ownership. Concluding his intervention, Shri Ghosh observed that the future of SDG 6 depends upon convergence—not only of government departments, but equally of financing, institutions, technology and citizen participation. Water security, he concluded, is ultimately synonymous with human security, and transforming water into a catalyst for inclusive development requires integrated action across every level of governance.

Ms. Sonja Koeppel, Secretary to the UNECE Water Convention, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

Representing the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Ms. Sonja Koeppel situated the discussion within the broader international framework governing transboundary water cooperation. She observed that although water underpins climate resilience, food security, biodiversity conservation, public health and sustainable economic development, governance structures worldwide continue to remain fragmented across sectors and institutions. While some progress has been achieved under SDG 6, implementation remains uneven across regions, with ecosystems continuing to degrade and water quality deteriorating in many parts of the world. These realities, she argued, underscore the urgent need for stronger institutions capable of integrating water governance across sectors, administrative boundaries and national jurisdictions.



Highlighting one of the defining characteristics of global freshwater resources, Ms. Koeppel noted that more than sixty per cent of the world's freshwater flows across international borders. Consequently, effective management of transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers has become indispensable not only for achieving SDG 6 but also for strengthening regional peace, economic cooperation, food security and climate resilience. She explained that despite this reality, only a limited number of countries possessing shared water resources currently maintain operational institutional arrangements for cooperative management, leaving considerable untapped opportunities for collective development.

Drawing upon the experiences of the UNECE Water Convention, Ms. Koeppel demonstrated how legally binding international cooperation frameworks can successfully transform shared water resources into platforms for collaboration rather than sources of conflict. Since opening its membership globally in 2016, the Convention has expanded well beyond Europe, bringing together countries across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia to strengthen governance, promote Integrated Water Resources Management, improve monitoring systems and facilitate transboundary data sharing. Through institutional dialogue, countries have been able to build trust, coordinate investments and establish long-term governance mechanisms that remain resilient despite changing political circumstances.

Illustrating practical examples, Ms. Koeppel referred to collaborative governance arrangements established between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for managing the Chu and Talas River basins, where joint commissions coordinate water allocation, infrastructure maintenance and hydrological information exchange. She further highlighted cross-sectoral nexus assessments undertaken within the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins, which successfully brought together ministries responsible for water, agriculture, energy and environmental protection to jointly evaluate trade-offs and identify integrated investment

priorities. These initiatives, she explained, demonstrate how water cooperation naturally evolves into broader cross-sectoral governance encompassing irrigation efficiency, hydropower planning, ecosystem restoration and climate adaptation.

Another central theme of Ms. Koeppel's intervention concerned inclusive governance. She argued that sustainable water management cannot be achieved solely through governmental action but requires the active participation of river basin organisations, academia, civil society, local communities and the private sector. Referring to the National Policy Dialogues supported under the Water Convention in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and more recently Iraq, she explained how inclusive multi-stakeholder platforms have successfully built consensus around integrated water policies while strengthening institutional legitimacy and long-term implementation capacity. Such participatory governance models ensure that technical expertise, local knowledge and policy priorities converge within coherent decision-making processes.

Concluding her remarks, Ms. Koeppel emphasised that the forthcoming 2026 United Nations Water Conference represents a pivotal opportunity to transition from political commitments towards concrete implementation. Strong institutions, continuous dialogue, transparent information sharing and long-term cooperation, she argued, remain the cornerstones of sustainable water governance. She encouraged governments, development partners and civil society organisations to actively engage in the preparatory processes leading to both the UN Water Conference and the next Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Water Convention, reaffirming that strengthened cooperation will remain indispensable for accelerating global progress towards SDG 6.



Ms. Mio Oka, Country Director, India Resident Mission, Asian Development Bank

Ms. Mio Oka opened her intervention by emphasising that water is one of the few development resources that simultaneously influences every major sector of society, including agriculture, food security, public health, urban development, ecosystem integrity, climate resilience and economic competitiveness. Despite this universally acknowledged importance, she

observed that governance systems in many countries—including developed economies—continue to manage water through fragmented institutional structures, resulting in inefficient planning, competing priorities and suboptimal investment outcomes. She argued that overcoming these institutional silos constitutes one of the foremost prerequisites for translating the concept of Water Transversality into practical implementation.

She explained that the Asian Development Bank has increasingly embedded Integrated Water Resources Management across its investment portfolio by treating water as a strategic development enabler rather than merely an infrastructure sector. Under this approach, water considerations are systematically integrated into agricultural transformation, urban development, ecosystem restoration and climate adaptation programmes, thereby strengthening resilience while maximising development impacts. This integrated planning framework enables governments to optimise water allocation, improve resource efficiency and better manage competing demands arising from agriculture, industry, domestic consumption and environmental conservation.

Drawing upon ADB's ongoing operations in India, Ms. Oka highlighted several examples demonstrating the practical application of Water Transversality. These included programmes supporting climate-smart agriculture and irrigation efficiency in Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, watershed restoration initiatives in Assam, Meghalaya and Himachal Pradesh, and integrated urban water infrastructure investments in Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, jointly implemented with the World Bank. These interventions deliberately combine water supply, sanitation, drainage, flood resilience and ecosystem management within unified planning frameworks, thereby embedding climate resilience into long-term urban and rural development.

Dr. Eric Tardieu, Director General, International Office for Water (OiEau); Secretary General, International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO); Vice President, World Water Council

Dr. Eric Tardieu positioned river basin governance at the centre of operationalising Water Transversality, emphasising that integrated water resources management becomes meaningful only when implemented through robust basin-scale institutions capable of coordinating multiple stakeholders, sectors and administrative jurisdictions. Introducing the work of the International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO), he explained that the organisation has consistently promoted basin-level governance as the most appropriate institutional mechanism for managing water resources, particularly where rivers and aquifers transcend political boundaries. Basin organisations, he observed, are themselves practical examples of multi-stakeholder partnerships, bringing together governments, technical institutions, local authorities, water users and civil society to collectively plan and manage water resources.



Dr. Tardieu stressed that integration must remain the guiding principle of future water governance. Rather than focusing solely on infrastructure development or water allocation, basin organisations must integrate environmental protection, economic development, social inclusion, climate adaptation and ecosystem resilience within unified management frameworks. Such institutions, he argued, should function through reliable water information systems, comprehensive basin management plans and evidence-based investment strategies that enable governments to make informed decisions based upon hydrological realities rather than administrative boundaries. Inclusive governance, incorporating cross-sectoral coordination and stakeholder participation, represents an indispensable requirement for translating integrated water resources management from theory into practice.

Highlighting practical international experiences, Dr. Tardieu presented the collaboration between INBO and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on integrating water governance with sustainable fisheries management across several river basins and lake systems, including Lake Victoria, the Mekong Basin, Lake Titicaca, the Santa Fe region of Argentina and the Amazon Basin. These initiatives demonstrate how integrated basin governance simultaneously contributes to food security, ecosystem conservation and sustainable livelihoods while strengthening cooperation among different sectors. Such examples illustrate the practical application of Water Transversality by aligning water management objectives with broader development priorities and reinforcing policy coherence across traditionally disconnected sectors.

A significant portion of Dr. Tardieu's intervention focused on expanding the conventional understanding of water resources. He argued that the future of water security requires

governments to move beyond exclusive reliance on traditional freshwater sources by systematically integrating treated wastewater reuse and desalination into national water resource planning. As climate variability intensifies and freshwater availability becomes increasingly uncertain, these non-conventional resources must become integral components of the overall water resource mix. However, he cautioned that their successful integration depends upon establishing appropriate monitoring systems, governance frameworks, allocation mechanisms and regulatory oversight comparable to those governing conventional water resources. Simultaneously, demand-side management must receive equal policy attention to ensure efficient utilisation of all available water resources.

Dr. Tardieu also underscored the strategic importance of water information systems in strengthening governance. Effective planning, he explained, depends upon transparent data sharing, integrated monitoring networks and collaborative knowledge management across institutions and sectors. Data should no longer remain fragmented among individual agencies but instead become a shared public resource supporting better policy decisions, investment planning and adaptive management. In this regard, he highlighted INBO's recently launched peer-to-peer initiative enabling basin organisations worldwide to exchange practical experiences, technical expertise and governance innovations. Such collaborative learning platforms, he argued, accelerate institutional capacity while strengthening global cooperation on integrated water governance.

Concluding his remarks, Dr. Tardieu reaffirmed that Water Transversality ultimately depends upon stronger institutional integration, enhanced international cooperation and practical implementation at basin level. Basin organisations, supported by robust information systems, inclusive governance structures and cross-sectoral partnerships, offer one of the most effective institutional mechanisms for accelerating progress towards SDG 6 while simultaneously advancing climate resilience, ecosystem restoration and sustainable development.



Shri Sampath Kumar, Additional Chief Secretary, Government of Meghalaya and Chief Executive Officer, Meghalaya Basin Development Authority

In his recorded address, Shri Sampath Kumar presented Meghalaya's governance experience as an illustration of how systemic institutional transformation can strengthen water security while simultaneously promoting ecological conservation

and sustainable livelihoods. He began by highlighting the paradox confronting Meghalaya, one of the world's highest rainfall regions, where climate change has increasingly produced seasonal water scarcity despite abundant precipitation. This changing hydrological reality, he observed, has fundamentally altered public priorities, with communities increasingly identifying water security as one of their foremost developmental concerns, even above employment in certain regions.

Responding to these emerging challenges, the Government of Meghalaya undertook a comprehensive institutional transformation centred on landscape-based planning rather than conventional departmental programmes. Shri Kumar explained that fragmented governance had previously resulted in isolated interventions with limited long-term impact. Consequently, the State shifted towards integrated landscape management that coordinates multiple government departments, aligns natural resource conservation with socio-economic development and focuses interventions at ecosystem scale rather than administrative

boundaries. This approach enables simultaneous improvements in watershed protection, groundwater recharge, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience and livelihood generation.

A distinctive feature of Meghalaya's strategy has been the integration of livelihood security within ecosystem conservation. Shri Kumar emphasised that environmental protection cannot succeed through restrictive regulations alone. Instead, local communities must receive tangible economic incentives to become active partners in conservation. He described the State's innovative Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) policy, through which communities are incentivised to conserve forests, recharge catchments and restore degraded landscapes while simultaneously improving household incomes. Complementary initiatives involving community nurseries, watershed restoration and sustainable land management further strengthen both ecological resilience and rural livelihoods, illustrating how environmental conservation and economic development can reinforce one another rather than compete.

Concluding his intervention, Shri Kumar observed that contemporary water challenges are inherently interconnected and therefore require equally integrated solutions. Climate change, biodiversity conservation, water security, livelihoods and community participation cannot be addressed independently. Instead, durable solutions emerge only through systemic thinking, institutional convergence and long-term partnerships that place communities at the centre of environmental governance. Such an approach, he argued, exemplifies the practical application of Water Transversality within sub-national governance.

**Prof. Eddy Moors, Former Rector and Director,
IHE Delft Institute for Water Education**

Professor Eddy Moors brought an important human dimension to the dialogue by arguing that achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 requires not only investments in infrastructure and governance reforms but also a fundamental transformation in education, capacity development and societal awareness. He observed that while considerable attention has been devoted globally to financing water infrastructure and strengthening institutions, comparatively little emphasis has been placed on preparing societies and future generations to understand, manage and value water as a shared resource. Water Transversality, he argued, cannot be realised unless education itself becomes transversal, embedding water literacy across disciplines and educational systems.



Drawing upon a recent foresight study commissioned by the European Parliament, Professor Moors explained that even developed regions are increasingly experiencing water scarcity resulting from climate change, population growth and changing patterns of water demand. These evolving pressures demonstrate that traditional sectoral approaches are no longer sufficient and that stronger collaboration across institutional and geographical boundaries has become indispensable. While integrated governance and technological innovation remain important, he argued that long-term resilience ultimately depends upon an informed society capable of understanding the complexity of water challenges and actively participating in sustainable water management. Public awareness, therefore, should be regarded as a strategic investment rather than a supplementary activity.

Professor Moors emphasised that education forms the bedrock of informed citizenship. Schools and universities possess unparalleled opportunities to cultivate environmental responsibility, systems thinking and collaborative problem-solving from an early age. Through structured education, individuals develop the knowledge required to participate meaningfully

in public decision-making, adopt sustainable water-use practices and support innovative governance approaches. He stressed that this becomes particularly important as governments increasingly implement transformative policies requiring behavioural change alongside technological solutions. In his view, education enables societies not merely to understand water challenges but to become active contributors to their resolution.

Turning to higher education and research, Professor Moors highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary academic programmes capable of addressing the interconnected nature of contemporary water challenges. Universities must increasingly integrate hydrology, environmental sciences, economics, governance, climate science, diplomacy and conflict resolution within their curricula to prepare future professionals for increasingly complex decision-making environments. He also expressed concern regarding the growing global shortage of qualified water professionals, observing that many countries are already struggling to recruit and retain skilled personnel capable of designing, operating and maintaining modern water systems. Accelerating professional training and lifelong learning therefore represents a critical prerequisite for achieving SDG 6.

Concluding his intervention, Professor Moors called for stronger integration between the global water and education communities. Looking ahead to the 2026 United Nations Water Conference, he proposed that Ministers of Education should participate alongside Ministers responsible for Water Resources to jointly develop strategies for mainstreaming water education across school systems and professional training institutions. Strengthening water literacy, building institutional capacity and empowering future generations, he concluded, are indispensable prerequisites for achieving sustainable water governance and fully operationalising Water Transversality.



Ms. Ulrike Kelm, Deputy Executive Director, International Water Resources Association (IWRA)

Representing the International Water Resources Association (IWRA), Ms. Ulrike Kelm reaffirmed that water lies at the heart of sustainable development and serves as the fundamental connector linking every Sustainable Development Goal. Introducing IWRA's global network of more than 5,500 water professionals spanning science, policy and practice,

she emphasised that the Association's mission over the past five decades has been to bridge disciplinary boundaries and facilitate collaboration among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, governments, international organisations, civil society and the private sector. Such cross-sectoral engagement, she noted, closely reflects the underlying philosophy of Water Transversality.

Ms. Kelm observed that contemporary water challenges have become increasingly complex due to the combined impacts of climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, excessive abstraction, growing population pressures and deteriorating infrastructure. In several parts of the world, armed conflicts have further intensified water insecurity through the destruction of critical water infrastructure, leaving millions without access to essential services. These multiple pressures, she argued, demonstrate that water can no longer be viewed merely as an environmental concern but rather as a strategic development issue with profound implications for human security, economic stability and social well-being.

Reflecting upon the current global status of SDG 6, Ms. Kelm highlighted that more than two billion people continue to lack safely managed drinking water services, while billions remain without adequate sanitation. Large volumes of wastewater are still discharged untreated into rivers, lakes and coastal ecosystems, contributing to widespread pollution and environmental degradation. Agriculture, meanwhile, continues to account for the overwhelming majority of global freshwater withdrawals, further intensifying pressures on already stressed water systems. These statistics, she emphasised, represent far more than technical challenges; they translate directly into lost educational opportunities, deteriorating public health, increased burdens on women and girls, declining agricultural productivity and widening socio-economic inequalities.

Looking towards the future, Ms. Kelm identified the 2026 United Nations Water Conference as a pivotal opportunity to move beyond declarations and accelerate implementation through strengthened partnerships. She stressed that the Conference should not be regarded as an end in itself but rather as a catalyst for sustained collaboration, innovation and collective action. She also highlighted forthcoming global platforms, including the Second Islands Water Congress in Jamaica and the Twentieth World Water Congress in Istanbul, as important opportunities for maintaining international momentum, sharing best practices and advancing evidence-based solutions.

Concluding her remarks, Ms. Kelm reiterated that while water remains under unprecedented pressure worldwide, it simultaneously represents humanity's greatest opportunity for cooperation. By strengthening partnerships across disciplines, sectors and borders, the international community can transform water from a source of vulnerability into a foundation for resilient, inclusive and sustainable development.

Dr. Neera Shrestha Pradhan, Water and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Lead, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)

Dr. Neera Shrestha Pradhan broadened the conceptual understanding of Water Transversality by introducing what she described as the "vertical dimension" of water governance. While previous speakers had extensively discussed the horizontal integration of water across sectors such as energy, agriculture, health, biodiversity and climate, she argued that equal attention must be given to the movement of water across landscapes—from glaciers and mountain ecosystems to downstream river basins and coastal regions. Drawing upon ICIMOD's experience in the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region, which serves as the source of ten major Asian river systems sustaining nearly two billion people downstream, she emphasised that effective water governance must account for the interconnectedness of upstream and downstream ecosystems. National and sub-national water policies, therefore, should incorporate basin-wide planning that recognises the ecological, hydrological and socio-economic interdependencies existing throughout entire river systems.

Building upon this perspective, Dr. Pradhan stressed that regional cooperation should not be confined solely to geographical proximity but should equally encompass collaborative knowledge generation, scientific research and evidence-based policymaking. She highlighted several successful regional knowledge-sharing platforms facilitated by ICIMOD, including the Hindu Kush Himalayan Disaster Risk Reduction Hub, Cryosphere Hub, Brahmaputra Basin Network and Ganges Basin Network. These collaborative mechanisms bring together



scientists, policymakers and practitioners from multiple countries to jointly analyse shared water challenges, exchange best practices and strengthen regional cooperation. Such networks, she argued, illustrate how Water Transversality extends beyond institutional integration to include continuous learning, collective scientific understanding and coordinated regional action.

A significant portion of Dr. Pradhan's intervention focused on integrating Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) into Water Transversality. She cautioned that water insecurity should not be understood exclusively as a chronic governance challenge characterised by underinvestment and institutional fragmentation. In mountainous regions, water-related disasters frequently manifest as sudden shocks—including glacier lake outburst floods (GLOFs), flash floods, landslide-induced dam failures and extreme precipitation events—that can destroy decades of infrastructure investments within a matter of hours. Referring to scientific evidence indicating that the Hindu Kush Himalayan region is warming at approximately 0.28°C per decade and experiencing glacier mass losses approaching sixty-five per cent compared with previous decades, she warned that nearly one million people living near glacial lakes face increasing risks from catastrophic flooding by the end of the century. These realities, she argued, make Disaster Risk Reduction an indispensable pillar of integrated water governance rather than an afterthought.

Concluding her remarks, Dr. Pradhan highlighted the importance of inclusive data systems for achieving equitable water governance. National SDG indicators frequently rely upon aggregate statistics that obscure disparities affecting mountain communities, remote settlements and women-headed households. She argued that meaningful participation begins with visibility; unless vulnerable communities are systematically represented through disaggregated data, they cannot be effectively targeted through financing, early warning systems or public policies. She therefore called for stronger sub-national data systems, dedicated representation of mountain communities within governance structures and institutional mechanisms that move beyond consultation towards genuine participation in water-related decision-making.



Mr. Archisman Mitra, Senior Water Economist, World Bank

Concluding the panel discussions, Mr. Archisman Mitra translated many of the conceptual themes discussed throughout the dialogue into a set of practical and immediately actionable priorities. Acknowledging that previous speakers had comprehensively outlined the magnitude of the global water crisis, the financing gap and the urgency of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6, he emphasised that the time had come to shift from broad principles towards implementable solutions. Water, he observed, is fundamentally a systems challenge, and consequently requires systems-based interventions capable of integrating governance, finance, communities and information.

The first priority identified by Mr. Mitra concerned community engagement, which he described not as a peripheral social component but as the foundation upon which sustainable water governance must be built. Reflecting upon decades of experience in water infrastructure investments, he noted that projects lacking meaningful community ownership frequently struggle to achieve long-term sustainability. Genuine participation requires communities to move beyond being passive beneficiaries towards becoming active decision-makers responsible for planning, monitoring and managing local water resources. Illustrating this

approach through India's Atal Bhujal Yojana, he explained how local communities were trained to undertake groundwater budgeting, prepare village-level water security plans and subsequently mobilise resources from multiple government programmes through convergence. Such locally prepared water security plans enabled different departmental investments to support shared groundwater management objectives, thereby demonstrating the practical value of Water Transversality at community level.

Mr. Mitra's second area of focus addressed the mobilisation of private capital for the water sector. Echoing earlier interventions highlighting the inadequacy of public finance alone, he argued that the primary role of public investment should increasingly be to reduce risks and create conditions capable of attracting larger volumes of private finance. Innovative financial instruments—including results-based financing, pooled municipal bonds and blended finance mechanisms—offer significant opportunities for expanding investments in water infrastructure. However, he cautioned that many water utilities remain financially unattractive to investors due to operational inefficiencies, weak financial management and limited institutional capacity. Strengthening governance, improving financial transparency and enhancing operational performance therefore become essential prerequisites for making utilities bankable and capable of leveraging additional private investment.

The third and final priority centred upon water accounting, which Mr. Mitra described as one of the most practical and achievable reforms currently available to governments. While recognising that Integrated Water Resources Management provides the overarching governance framework, he argued that effective water accounting constitutes its operational foundation. Advances in hydrological monitoring, remote sensing technologies and digital information systems have significantly improved governments' ability to monitor water availability, abstraction and consumption. Systematically accounting for where water originates, how it is allocated, how efficiently it is used and how it returns to the environment enables evidence-based decision-making across sectors. Although groundwater monitoring remains technically challenging, emerging innovations—including the use of energy consumption patterns to estimate groundwater abstraction—offer promising solutions. Establishing state-level institutional mechanisms responsible for comprehensive water accounting would significantly strengthen planning, resource allocation and long-term water security.

Moderator's Remarks

Bringing the dialogue to a close, Ms. Shweta Tyagi, Chief Functionary of India Water Foundation, synthesised the diverse perspectives presented throughout the session and reflected upon the emerging consensus among participants. She observed that despite representing governments, multilateral development banks, United Nations agencies, international organisations, academia and civil society, all speakers converged on one central conclusion: water can no longer be governed as an isolated sector but must become the organising principle for integrated sustainable development.



Summarising the deliberations, she noted that achieving the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda requires moving beyond fragmented sectoral interventions towards comprehensive Water Systems Partnerships capable of generating shared environmental, social and economic benefits. Progress towards SDG 6 will depend upon aligning political commitment, institutional capacity, innovative financing and inclusive governance within coherent policy frameworks

that recognise the interdependencies between water, health, agriculture, energy, biodiversity, climate resilience and economic development.

Ms. Tyagi further emphasised that the discussions demonstrated the necessity of mobilising collective action from governments, multilateral development banks, private sector organisations, philanthropic institutions, civil society and local communities. Stable regulatory frameworks, strengthened institutions and enabling policy environments remain fundamental prerequisites for attracting investments and scaling innovative solutions. Equally important is the transition towards circular economy approaches, including decentralised wastewater treatment, wastewater reuse, climate-smart agriculture and nature-based solutions capable of maximising resource efficiency while reducing environmental degradation.

Reflecting on the increasing impacts of climate change, she observed that future climate policies must place water at the centre of adaptation and resilience planning. Enhanced scientific cooperation, improved hydrological data, stronger educational initiatives, expanded information exchange and evidence-based decision-making will become increasingly important for managing growing uncertainties. She concluded that multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder partnerships offer the most effective pathway for accelerating cross-sectoral implementation of SDG 6 while simultaneously advancing broader sustainable development objectives.

Major Outcomes of the Dialogue

The deliberations demonstrated broad international consensus that Water Transversality provides a practical governance framework capable of accelerating Sustainable Development Goal 6 by positioning water as the central connecting element across climate resilience, food security, public health, biodiversity conservation, disaster risk reduction and economic development.

Participants agreed that fragmented institutional arrangements remain one of the principal barriers to effective implementation and that future governance models must strengthen policy coherence through integrated planning across sectors, ministries and administrative boundaries. River basin organisations, integrated water resources management frameworks and landscape-based planning approaches emerged as particularly effective institutional mechanisms for operationalising cross-sectoral governance.

The dialogue further underscored that closing the global financing gap will require innovative financing models combining public investment, multilateral finance, private capital, blended finance and community participation. Simultaneously, greater emphasis must be placed upon education, capacity development, scientific collaboration, disaster risk reduction, water accounting and digital information systems to strengthen long-term resilience.

Participants also recognised that achieving SDG 6 depends upon empowering local communities, integrating indigenous knowledge, strengthening regional cooperation and ensuring that vulnerable populations are represented within decision-making processes through inclusive governance and disaggregated data systems.

Conclusion

The High-Level Policy Dialogue reaffirmed that water is not simply one Sustainable Development Goal among many but the enabling foundation upon which the entire 2030 Agenda depends. Throughout the deliberations, speakers consistently demonstrated that accelerating SDG 6 requires moving beyond sector-specific interventions towards integrated

governance systems that recognise the interconnected nature of water, climate, ecosystems, health, food, energy and human development.

The dialogue also reinforced that Water Transversality is no longer merely an emerging concept but an actionable framework capable of guiding future policy, financing and institutional reforms. By strengthening partnerships among governments, international organisations, development finance institutions, academia, civil society and communities, countries can transform water from a source of increasing vulnerability into a catalyst for resilience, equity and sustainable prosperity.

As preparations continue for the 2026 United Nations Water Conference, the dialogue generated a strong call for translating international commitments into measurable action through strengthened cooperation, innovative financing, inclusive governance and integrated implementation. The proceedings collectively underscored that only through sustained multi-stakeholder collaboration and systems thinking can the global community successfully achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 and secure a water-resilient future for all.

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