

# HIGH-LEVEL SYMPOSIUM ON WATER



Lisbon, 27<sup>th</sup> of June 2022

Bridging SDG 6 and SDG 14  
Fresh and salt water communities working together

## CONCEPT NOTE

### A. Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. The goals “to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” (SDG 6) and “to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development” (SDG 14) were included, reflecting the increased attention these issues receive in the global political agenda, as well as the need for global action.

The critical importance of water has been highlighted by the pandemic, as access to safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and hygiene were amongst the first lines of defence. Water should also be at the centre of efforts to “recover better” from COVID-19. Scaling up access to water and sanitation services not only contributes to containing the current crisis, but it also increases resilience to future crises. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges facing the oceans and marine biodiversity (such as marine plastic pollution), which cannot be fully addressed without a comprehensive strategy that takes into account the full cycle of water.

The 2030 Agenda acknowledges the integrated and indivisible nature of its goals and targets and recognizes the need to address these interlinkages to fully achieve its aims. SDG 14 on Oceans and SDG 6 on Water and Sanitation are inextricably linked, with many SDG 6 targets not being achieved without also meeting the SDG 14 targets, and vice versa. Despite the progress made so far, existing actions for the achievement of SDG 14 and SDG 6 are insufficient, in part due to limited coordination between the ocean and freshwater community, and collaborative action is therefore imperative if these goals are to be met, especially in a context of climate change. Accelerating action would require building on synergies between various ocean and water-related targets, processes and initiatives, and providing for enhanced cooperation and coordination.



REPÚBLICA  
PORTUGUESA

ENVIRONMENT AND  
CLIMATE ACTION

The General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed<sup>1</sup>, the International Decade for Action on “Water for Sustainable Development” (the “Water Action Decade”) in the period from 2018-2028, to further improve cooperation, partnership and capacity development in response to the ambitious 2030 Agenda.

The objectives of the Water Action Decade are a greater focus on sustainable development, the integrated management of water resources for the achievement of social, economic, and environmental objectives and the implementation and promotion of related programmes and projects. Simultaneously, cooperation and partnerships at all levels must be enhanced in order to help to achieve internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Following up on this process, the General Assembly decided<sup>2</sup> to convene, in New York, a High-Level Meeting on Water in 2021 and from 22 to 24 March 2023, coinciding with the World Water Day, the United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018-2028 (the UN Conference on Water), co-hosted by the Netherlands and Tajikistan.

To guarantee an open and inclusive preparatory process, the General Assembly decided that regional and global preparatory meetings should be organized prior to the Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, as appropriate, and informed by existing water-related meetings at the regional and global levels.

Accordingly, UNGA Resolution A/RES/75/212 recognizes, in its paragraph 18, this High-Level Symposium on Water as a meeting that will provide input for the 2023 UN Water Conference.

The General Assembly further decided<sup>3</sup> to convene the United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development (Ocean Conference<sup>4</sup>). The overarching theme of the Conference is "Scaling up ocean action based on science and innovation for the implementation of Goal 14: stocktaking, partnerships and solutions". The Governments of Kenya and Portugal will co-host the Conference to be held in Lisbon, Portugal, from 27<sup>th</sup> June to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2022<sup>5</sup>.

Within this context, the government of Portugal, in close cooperation with the United Nations, expressed its intention to host a High-level Symposium on Water, in Lisbon, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, during the UN Ocean Conference, as an input to the preparatory process of the 2023 UN Conference on Water.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution 71/222, of 21 December 2016

<sup>2</sup> Resolution 73/226, of 20 December 2018

<sup>3</sup> Resolution 73/292

<sup>4</sup> <https://oceancconference.un.org/#home>

<sup>5</sup> Decision 75/578, of 9 September 2021

UN Conferences represent key opportunities to respond to the urgent and ambitious action needed to implement the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The Ocean Conference is a key opportunity to bring stakeholders together, share experiences, identify solutions, build capacity, and establish partnerships to accelerate the implementation of our common goals. There are strong linkages between the ocean and water, and collaboration between the two communities is needed if the respective SDGs are to be achieved.

## B. High-level Symposium on Water

With the Decade of Action 2020-2030 to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals well under way, and when the UN aims at breaking down silos to foster collaborative action towards a global vision, hosting the High-Level Symposium on Water, in parallel with the UN Ocean Conference, is an opportunity to bring the water and ocean communities together.

The realization of this event will allow to strengthen coordination from source to sea, to promote integrated cross-sectoral approaches that address the linkages between SDG 6 and 14 and accelerate progress on achieving them, to maximise synergies across the water and ocean sectors and to produce co-benefits towards both climate mitigation and adaptation.

Water, as a strategic resource for human development, was always present in all the Societies development as a key structural element. Through history, rivers and lakes were at the core of the social and economic development, creating a specific and closed approach to the planning of their uses.

On the other hand, water in the hydrological cycle depends largely on the oceans and seas and the health of oceans and seas depends on coastal and inland water and sanitation management. Therefore, sustainable management of oceans, seas and marine resources requires integrated water resources management involving the multiplicity and diversity of water actors. The Ocean's sustainability is also connected to sustainable water management.

These strong synergies between targets of SDG 14 and SDG 6 on integrated resources management (6.5, 14.1 and 14.2), are also seen in the targets on water quality (14.1 and 6.3) and ecosystems (14.2 and 6.6), as well as on access to safe drinking water (6.1) and increased water-use efficiency (6.4) through sustainable coastal ecosystem management (14.2), and marine pollution reduction (14.1) through adequate sanitation provision (6.2).

Source-to-sea linkages must be properly recognized and addressed as part of SDG implementation to ensure that the linkages between the different goals, and their targets, are considered directly. Doing so will help balance upstream and downstream demands and make sure that investments to forward the achievement of one of the SDGs does not impede the achievement of others.

Traditionally, marine, and freshwater issues have been dealt separately, as for instance in the scientific and research programmes typically dealing with freshwater and saltwater separately. At national level, usually there are different ministries and authorities dealing with marine and freshwater issues, often facing communication and articulation challenges among themselves and in some cases even with overlapping competences.

The 2019 IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere concluded that fragmented governance - across sectors and in governments - prevents effective responses to climate risks. This can also be applied to other threats to water and the oceans. Only with stronger governance, new forms of dialogue among all actors involved, and more coherent and coordinated policies will it be possible to achieve the progress we need by 2030, understanding that flows from land to sea are linked into one major system, a system whose complexity increases when river basins cross the borders of two or more countries. This symposium also constitutes an opportunity to share good practices of transboundary water cooperation around the world.

The design of new policies must consider the role of rivers and estuaries in protecting our oceans health as well as the need to protect ecosystems services.

Water planning instruments must take into due consideration the impacts that river discharge will have in ocean's health. The problem of diffuse pollution from agriculture must also be considered in this context, as well as the adverse effects of excessive nutrient concentrations in water bodies that promote eutrophication. A more integrated approach in watershed planning will allow to prevent more complex challenges in oceans policies. Water and Ocean come together in the world's deltas, that have huge issues to solve to safeguard water quality and livelihoods. Wetlands management is therefore another crucial element.

The period between 2021-2030 was proclaimed by the General Assembly as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, with the aim of supporting and scaling up efforts to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide and raise awareness of the importance of successful ecosystem restoration. This symposium can contribute to raise awareness on the need for greater ecosystems protection, as well as to highlight the importance of ecosystems restoration.

On the other hand, effective wastewater management, especially in coastal urban areas, is a basic condition to prevent the deterioration of ocean's quality. Universal water and sanitation services, operated under sustainable management models, must be in place to guarantee people's health, social and economic growth, the quality of environment, but also marine and coastal ecosystems protection by way of stewarding and protecting water quality and supply.

Adequate flows of water and sediment to feed estuaries, deltas and downstream ecosystems are crucial for the protection of coastal and marine ecosystems. As competition for limited resources grow, water scarcity has also been shown to travel downstream as resources are utilized upstream. While dam and reservoir construction

are common actions address water scarcity, meet energy demand, and reduce flood risk, it is also the most important factor influencing land-ocean sediment flows, with dams trapping around 30 per cent of global sediment flows. This contributes to erosion of riverbeds and coasts, sediment starvation of deltas downstream and influences turbidity and water flows crucial for ecosystem functioning. Combined with sea-level rise and other effects of climate change, the consequences can be serious.

Of the over 300 million metric tons(mt) of plastics produced globally each year, some 4.8 to 12.7 million metric tons reaches the ocean impacting negatively on marine organisms and ecosystems. Only about 9 percent of the over 2 billion mt of plastic produced to date has been recycled, so we remain a long way from truly 'closing the loop' on ocean plastics pollution. UNEP estimate the annual damage from marine plastics at USD \$13 billion per year and growing. Rivers represent a major vector for the introduction of plastics to the ocean, transporting between 9 and 50 percent of the total. Microplastics are increasingly found in marine organisms.

New and renovated, stronger and resilient infrastructures, including nature-based solutions - are critical to guarantee water and sanitation services worldwide. Furthermore, adaptation to climate change calls for increasingly resilient water infrastructure, including green infrastructures. Only with the integrated management of drinking water, wastewater, and rainwater systems we will be able to have resilient systems.

The challenge ahead is to mobilize all stakeholders to solve the financing gap of the sector and to guarantee effective value for money of the adopted solutions. International Financial Institutions have a critical role to play in this regard and must be prepared and conscious of the relevance of this integrated vision of the whole system from the source out into the sea. This event constitutes an opportunity to call for stronger mobilization of resources for the implementation of SDG 6 and 14: we need to do more, and we need to do it in innovative ways, engaging all stakeholders. The debate on water financing must also be framed in the context of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, we must be conscious that although the idea of a blue globe suggests almost unlimited water reserves, only a small percentage of this water is easily usable. Circular economy applied to water is the key to better protect our water resources. In this context, reuse of treated wastewater and desalination are innovative alternatives for water management that can be further developed worldwide. Reduce, reuse, and recycle are key concepts when thinking on the future of our blue planet.

Finally, we must dedicate some attention to the fact that all these inter-relations between water and ocean assume even more relevance in a context of climate change. Ocean acidification or extreme water-related events are some of the impacts of

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<sup>6</sup> The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa Action Agenda), adopted by the General Assembly on 27 July 2015 (resolution 69/313, annex)

climate change that we are already testifying in some countries around the world, and we need to work together to adapt and mitigate them.

The High-Level Symposium on Water represents a unique opportunity to bring together worldwide political leaders and high-level decision-makers dealing with both “freshwater” and “saltwater” to debate water management in an integrated manner. By doing so, this event is an opportunity to strengthen the role of water and ocean in the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement and offers a platform for the presentation of existing successful best practices and partnerships and stimulate innovative and concrete new partnerships that bring together the water and oceans community.

This event constitutes an opportunity to call for stronger mobilization of resources for the implementation of SDG 6 and 14: we need to do more, and we need to do it in innovative ways, bringing communities closer together and involving new stakeholders.

Voluntary commitments by Member States and stakeholders are encouraged, particularly those that highlight the interlinkages between SDG 6 and SDG 14 by contributing to the implementation of both these SDGs and associated targets; the said voluntary commitments are to be submitted through the existing platforms for SDG 6 and SDG 14.

A gender perspective will also be introduced in this debate. Women and girls have a particular role in managing water resources and there are still several constraints in what concerns the access of women to water management. It is necessary to present lessons learned in promoting women’s participation in decision-making for water management and to highlight the need to improve women’s access to water resources.

#### *a. Expected Outcomes*

The Symposium will bring key stakeholders together from the water and ocean community, to strengthen coordination, share experiences, identify solutions, build capacity, and establish partnerships to accelerate the implementation of SDG 6 and 14 and therefore the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development common goals.

The Symposium will highlight existing successful partnerships and stimulate innovative and concrete new partnerships that bring together the water and ocean communities to identify further joined up ways and means to support the achievement of Goal 6 and 14.

A Chair’s Summary or a similar type of non-negotiated outcome document is envisioned.

The outcome document of this Symposium will be used to inform the 2022 UN Ocean Conference, the 2023 UN Water Conference, the 2023 High-Level Political Forum on sustainable development, as well as other UN and regional water-related processes. Outcomes may also be forwarded to the UNFCCC Climate COP 27 in Egypt and the CDB Biodiversity COP 16.

### **b. Format**

This Symposium will occur on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June, between 2.00 pm and 6.00 pm, during the UN Ocean Conference.

The event will include an opening ceremony (45 min) with the intervention of key high-level representatives from the Government of Portugal and UN Member States, three High-Level Roundtables (1 hour each) and a Closing Ceremony (15 min).

The Three High-Level Roundtables will be dedicated to the following themes:

1. Synergies between SDG 6 and SDG 14 - an integrated vision of the whole hydrological cycle: strengthening cross-sectoral approaches to accelerate implementation of related targets, including financing and governance.
2. Water and Sanitation Services Bridging SDG 6 and SDG 14.
3. Existing successful and innovative partnerships to support the implementation of SDG 6 and 14: Challenges, opportunities, and actions.

### **c. Participants**

This Symposium will include the participation of high-level representatives from Member-States, observers of the UN and from the wider UN System, both from the Water Community and from the Oceans Community, including stakeholders from civil society, academia, and the private sector, as well as other relevant stakeholders. Financial institutions and other donors will also be invited to participate.

## **C. Why Portugal?**

Portugal has a well-established tradition of playing an active role in ocean-related processes at the global level and within the United Nations.

Additionally, Portugal is also at the centre of several challenges related to “fresh water”. Portugal is referred in several studies as one of the Mediterranean countries most affected by climate change. Many of these changes are already occurring in Portugal, leading to increases in heat waves, droughts, erosion, forest fires, storms, and floods. They negatively affect ecosystems, economic sectors, infrastructure and human health and well-being. Water resources are at the top of our concerns on what concerns to climate change impacts but are also in the top of our strategy for adaptation.

Portugal was one of the first countries in the world to commit to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and has strong environmental and climate policies where water protection and conservation are crucial elements.

Portugal shares, with Spain, a position of five downstream river basins, with 64% of its territory included in these basins. Transboundary cooperation, as well as water diplomacy are thus unavoidable given the geographic constraints, and a long and

fruitful experience have been shared between both countries. Both Portugal and Spain are parties to the United Nations freshwater conventions.

Portugal is also internationally recognized by the progress achieved in water and sanitation sectors over the past 25 years. 96% of the population is served by water supply services, 99% of water fully monitored and in compliance with European standards as well as 86% of population connected to wastewater treatment plants. This performance has direct impacts in the quality of the environment and citizens health.

Portugal is also becoming an important partner on knowledge and innovation in the field of water and sanitation. The Lisbon International Centre for Water (LIS-Water) was recently established. LIS-Water is a non-profit international centre for knowledge and innovation, focused on public policies, regulation and management of water services and related water resources. LIS-Water assists policy and decision makers to define the best approach on water problems and challenges and trains decision makers around the world.

Finally, Portugal is a country open to the world. SDG 17 advocates for the development of Partnerships for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Portugal has a long tradition of successful partnerships on water with several countries in the world, particularly African Portuguese Speaking Countries. Open dialogue and careful consideration of nation specificities is the best way to find national solutions for common problems. This experience is an added value and can be a good starting point for new and innovative international partnerships on water and ocean related SDGs.