Policy Brief Series

Recommendations for the UN Water Conference: Multilevel Action to Achieve SDG 6

November 2026

Introduction

This brief presents key recommendations by the United Nations Local2030 Coalition for the 2026 United Nations Water Conference to Accelerate the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, with five years to 2030, when decisions on SDG 6 and broader SDGs will have lasting impacts at the local level.

Amid compounding climate impacts, rising water insecurity, widening inequalities, growing macro-economic pressures, and persistent gaps in achieving SDG 6, the Conference is tasked with accelerating implementation, addressing implementation gaps, strengthening global water governance, and sustaining momentum on water as a central global development priority. The growing recognition of water as a connector for child and human rights, gender equality, adequate housing, climate resilience, food security, human mobility and displacement dynamics, health, biodiversity, and sustainable development underscores the need for global water commitments to be anchored in local realities and grounded in a human rights-based, gender-responsive approach.

Through a local lens, water intersects with multiple SDGs, directly affecting the quality and availability of drinking water, sanitation, and other sectors of the local economy. Local-level engagement is therefore crucial to translate water commitments into concrete realities through locally driven solutions that create impact.

The case for a localized, territorial approach

The water system is global; nevertheless, it is governed and managed at the local level: water and sanitation services, watershed and ecosystem protection, flood and drought management, wastewater treatment, and climate adaptation are planned, built, operated, and sustained primarily at the local and subnational levels, across cities, metropolitan areas, peri-urban regions, and rural territories, where infrastructure meets communities and where risks and trade-offs materialize. Rapid urbanization, changing land use patterns, economic and industrial reconfigurations, growing housing needs, and the persistent deprivation experienced by residents of informal settlements are increasingly shaping water demand, water risks, and service delivery challenges, underscoring the need to better integrate water governance with sustainable urban and territorial development.

As climate change accelerates hydrological instability at the same time as demands increase, water insecurity increasingly shapes industrialization, food and energy systems, digitalization, public health, livelihoods, geopolitics, displacement, and ecosystem stability. Local governments, utilities, businesses, basin authorities,

Indigenous Peoples, community institutions, and women-led organizations are directly navigating these intersecting pressures. In many cases, water users are faced with limited resources and operate under conditions of climate stress, inequality, and inadequate and insecure public provisions and rights. These challenges are particularly acute for residents in informal settlements, peri-urban areas, and underserved communities, where water insecurity often intersects with insecure land tenure, limited access to basic services and constrained employment and livelihood opportunities.

Localization is therefore not a delivery modality, but a resilience strategy.

When water management is localized, it can embed inclusion, participation, dialogue, and capacity building, de-risk development investments, and lay the foundations for long-term continuity. Local decision-making is therefore critical to shaping policies. Infrastructure and services planned and managed with strong local ownership and participation, including in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, are more resilient to political instability, better able to adapt to shocks, and more likely to sustain service delivery, particularly where local capacities are strengthened.

This is particularly critical in fragile, conflict-affected, and humanitarian settings, where strengthening the humanitarian–development–peace nexus (HDPN) is essential to ensure continuity of water and sanitation services and to bridge short-term emergency response with long-term systems strengthening. As essential services underpinning health, dignity, human rights, and productivity, locally anchored water and sanitation systems have demonstrated greater resilience and sustainability over time as opposed to externally driven solutions, which can have a significant impact on WASH-related diseases.[1]

The UN Water Conference therefore represents an opportunity to deliver operational clarity by ensuring the outcome recognizes local actors not only as implementers, but as essential partners in shaping policies, encouraging participatory governance, and sustaining water quality, access, and availability for all to benefit. By addressing local governance approaches and the financial sustainability of relevant local actors as a core principle of the Conference process and outcome, Member States can advance integrated responses to systemic water risks, protect water from emerging pressures, and ensure global ambition results in safe, equitable, durable, inclusive, and climate-resilient water outcomes. At the same time, regional water frameworks such as the Africa Water Vision 2063 and its First Implementation Plan (2026–2033) provide examples of how multi-level governance can be operationalized to connect global commitments on SDG 6 with ongoing regional implementation efforts and to strengthen coherence.

[1] For example, in Somalia, IOM supports water supply infrastructure through engagement with local authorities and communities, including solar-powered water systems that reduce operational costs and reliance on external fuel supply chains. Such locally supported approaches can strengthen the sustainability and resilience of water services in drought- and displacement-affected areas. <Beled Hawo's Story of Resilience in a Climate-impacted Regio | IOM Somalia>

Policy recommendations for the UN Water Conference

1) Anchor participatory water governance and implementation in multilevel, territory- or catchment-based approaches: Recognize that integrated water security, sanitation, watershed management, flood and drought response, and ecosystem protection are territorially rooted challenges that require cross-sectoral structured coordination across transboundary, national, subnational, and local levels of governance. Commit to strengthening multilevel water governance frameworks that enhance the capacity of duty-bearers and empower rights-holders to participate in decision-making and exercise their rights. These frameworks must create enabling environments for local action by clearly defining and operationalizing local roles across the full policy cycle, from co-design and planning to implementation, monitoring, and oversight. They should strengthen the technical, institutional, financial, and governance capacities of local and regional governments, basin authorities, utilities, and community institutions to effectively fulfil these roles and sustain water outcomes over the long term. This includes strengthening capacities related to inclusive and sustainable spatial planning, land management, climate adaptation, and infrastructure investment, particularly in informal settlements through people-centred upgrading strategies. The frameworks should also link water action to development plans and fiscal frameworks, while recognising central governments' responsibility to define national water policies and standards. To this end, encourage all national governments to apply the approaches and tools of the UNECE-WHO Europe Protocol on Water and Health.

2) Integrate localization explicitly into global and national water commitments: Call for national water strategies, nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and climate adaptation plans, and the Water Action Agenda commitments to include specific localization provisions, clearly articulating roles and responsibilities, and enabling subnational and community-level actors with requisite financing and capacity while ensuring that ecosystems-centred and basin-wide approaches are accommodated and supported where relevant. Recognize that localized treatment reduces construction needs, including for building large sewer transmission mains,[2] and provides opportunities for a local role in the circular economy and the water-energy-food nexus, including renewable local energy sources. Further recognize that water is not only essential for resilience and environmental sustainability, but also a strategic enabler of sustainable development, adequate housing, and the upgrading of informal settlements, while contributing to economic transformation, agricultural productivity, industrial development, trade, and job creation at the local level.

3) Strengthen basin-level and ecosystem-based water management through local institutions and transboundary cooperation: Promote hydrologically grounded, source-to-sea, basin-level, ecosystem-based approaches to water management that recognize rivers, aquifers, wetlands, and watersheds as living, integrated systems that flow across administrative boundaries. Encourage integrated urban catchment management approaches that connect urban development, watershed protection, groundwater management, stormwater management, and nature-based solutions across urban, peri-urban, and basin scales, while recognizing the social and ecological function of land. Support local and regional governments, Indigenous Peoples, small-scale and local food producers, and community institutions as co-stewards of water-related ecosystems and holistic water cycle management, including through decentralized and transboundary ecosystem-based stewardship arrangements and cooperation mechanisms, where appropriate. Recognize the role of transboundary river basin and aquifer organizations in facilitating cooperation, data sharing, joint planning, and conflict prevention across shared water resources.

[2] UNEP, Wastewater Treatment Solutions for Climate Mitigation: A Practical Guide

4) Enable direct and predictable financing for local water services and infrastructure: Acknowledge that water and sanitation services are primarily delivered at the local level, and local authorities and utilities require access to predictable, adequate finance. In line with the Seville Commitment and Seville Platform for Action, commit to strengthening subnational finance and decentralized cooperation and creating enabling financial environments for local action by expanding equitable, sustainable local access to development, climate, and humanitarian finance for water and sanitation-related infrastructure, resilience, and nature-based solutions, through gender-transformative and inclusive financing approaches. Promote flexible and blended financing approaches that support both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term development investments, ensuring continuity of services across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. To translate these resources into impact, support the development of bankable water investment pipelines with mechanisms to track contributions to social inclusion outcomes, leverage climate finance and opportunities within the blue economy, and strengthen the financial sustainability and creditworthiness of local water institutions and service providers. This will help accelerate progress towards SDG 6 and enhance long-term resilience.

5) Acknowledge water insecurity as a core systemic risk cutting across sectors and scales: Frame water explicitly as an integrating element across climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, the water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus, child and human rights, gender, health, adequate housing, and biodiversity, and highlight the role of local and regional governments and territorial authorities in coordinating cross-sectoral responses, recognizing WASH as a first line of defence against infectious diseases and a critical foundation for epidemic preparedness and health system resilience. Recognize also the importance of valuing water in all its dimensions – social, environmental, cultural, and economic – to inform policy, investment, and resource allocation decisions. Promote circular water economy approaches, including water reuse, wastewater resource recovery, efficiency improvements, and nature-based solutions, as pathways to enhance water security, build resilience, reduce environmental pressures, and create sustainable economic opportunities, while addressing the disproportionate burden that water insecurity places on women and girls and people facing intersecting forms of discrimination and expanding their opportunities for education, leadership, and economic empowerment.

6) Support inclusive, community-driven water and sanitation solutions: Reaffirm the importance of community-based, Indigenous, locally led, and age- and gender-informed solutions in achieving equitable access to safe drinking water and sanitation in homes, schools, health facilities, and workplaces, improving water quality, and protecting ecosystems. Commit to enabling participatory governance, social accountability mechanisms, and culturally appropriate approaches in water planning and service delivery, including for people living in informal settlements, peri-urban areas, and other underserved communities, as well as migrants, displaced, and crisis-affected persons. In this context, recognize water insecurity and climate stress as drivers of human mobility, and ensure inclusive, conflict-sensitive and gender-responsive WASH service provision for migrants, displaced populations, and host communities. Ensure that water and sanitation infrastructure, facilities, and services are designed and managed to reduce risks of gender-based violence, harassment, and insecurity, particularly for women and girls in humanitarian, displacement, and fragile settings.

7) Strengthen local, basin, and transboundary water management, data, monitoring, and reporting institutions and systems: Encourage national governments to accede to the globally open Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention), as it strengthens transboundary cooperation in the management of shared river basins and water resources. By fostering water basin cooperation across borders, the Convention also reinforces collaboration among communities, including local communities, living in shared watershed areas, and contributes to broader cross-border cooperation and mutual understanding. In this regard, promote appropriate, decision-relevant level (e.g. local, basin, transboundary) water data systems, including, where available, sex-, age-, and location-disaggregated data on access, quality, affordability, climate risk, and service reliability, including citizen-informed data, ensuring they are used to inform planning and investment decisions, and encourage alignment between local monitoring and national and global reporting processes, including inputs to the HLPF on SDG 6. Promote interoperable water information systems and data-sharing arrangements across institutions and governance levels to address data asymmetries and strengthen evidence-based decision-making. Mechanisms such as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) can help bridge these levels and strengthen global climate and water accountability and learning.

8) Empower water and sanitation service providers[3]: The majority of the over 285,000 water and sanitation utilities worldwide operate at the local level.[4] Recognize service providers, including small-scale and independent providers serving informal settlements, peri-urban areas, and other underserved communities, as essential forces for localization and universal access and as climate actors that implement locally led climate adaptation, mitigation, and circular economy solutions. Empower service providers with planning and revenue- generating capacities to progressively ensure resilient water, sanitation, and wastewater treatment services for all, while protecting the environment. Strengthen service providers and their institutional capacities to advance gender equality in employment, leadership, workforce development, occupational safety, and service delivery while improving efficiency, preventing pollution, reducing water losses, expanding access, ensuring synergies with planners and developers, improving sanitation services, and mitigating and adapting to climate change.

[3] This can also be achieved and scaled up through working with associations of service providers, such as EurEau for the European region.
[4] GWOPA, 2025. “Global Outlook on Water and Sanitation Service Providers. Water for Sustainable Cities” Available at: <https://gwopa.unhabitat.org/resources/library/global-outlook-water-and-sanitation-service-providers-water-sustainable-cities>