

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION FOR A WATER-SECURE FUTURE

By Andras Szorenyi

Water is fundamental to life, human dignity, economic prosperity, and environmental sustainability. Yet water resources are under unprecedented stress due to population growth, rapid urbanization, climate change, pollution, and inadequate governance. With 68% of the world's population projected to live in cities by 2050, ensuring effective urban planning, sanitation and reliable water services will be critical to protecting public health, advancing equality, and achieving sustainable development. Local and regional governments (LRGs) play a frontline role in providing equitable access and resilient systems – for which they require better participation in global decision-making, as well as stronger financial, and institutional support.

International cooperation on water is not optional; it is essential to finding adequate solutions. As the world enters the final five years of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ensuring safe drinking water

and sanitation for all (SDG 6) remains determinant for progress across the entire SDG framework. The 2026 United Nations Water Conference, co-hosted by the United Arab Emirates and Senegal represents a critical milestone to mobilize political will, investment, and collective action. It also offers a platform to better integrate local and regional governments into decision-making, among others to shape post-2030 water priorities.

This paper examines the importance of international cooperation on water issues, with a special focus on the role of LRGs in water governance and their necessary involvement in multilateral processes. It presents the growing water challenge, institutional frameworks and specific aspects of international water cooperation. It concludes with policy recommendations for States and for LRGs to guide the outcomes of the 2026 UN Water Conference and beyond.

Growing Water Challenge: Cities, Inequality, and Vulnerability

Rapid population growth and increasing population density are intensifying pressure on water and sanitation systems in urban areas. Informal settlements and marginalized neighborhoods are often the first to suffer from inadequate infrastructure, unsafe drinking water, and insufficient wastewater treatment. These failures create persistent risks of increasing inequalities, undermine public health, and disproportionately affect women, children, and vulnerable populations.

Water is a human right, a public service, and a shared resource. It must be governed in the public interest – and that starts at the local

level, where mayors and city leaders are on the frontlines ensuring access, equity, and accountability. Despite the efforts of LRGs, water shortages are becoming increasingly recurrent (e.g. Cape Town, Chennai, Mathis, Sao Paulo, Tehran, etc.). [WEF counts](#) more than 80 major cities enduring extreme water crises between 2000–25. Climate change is altering precipitation patterns, increasing the frequency of droughts and floods, and amplifying water scarcity in already stressed regions. Urban water systems designed for past climatic and demographic realities are struggling to cope with these shocks.



Learning from “close to Day Zero” events, cities’ peer-to-peer recommendations were clear at the Geneva Urban Debate on “[Local leadership for water resilience](#)”:

- Build the water crisis-management framework before you need it!
- Build trust and communicate the truth to the local population!
- Build a resilience-approach into governance, budget, and policy!

Water is vitally important for sustainable development from social, health, and economic perspectives. Access to safe water and sanitation underpins education outcomes, labor productivity, food security, energy generation, and ecosystem health. As

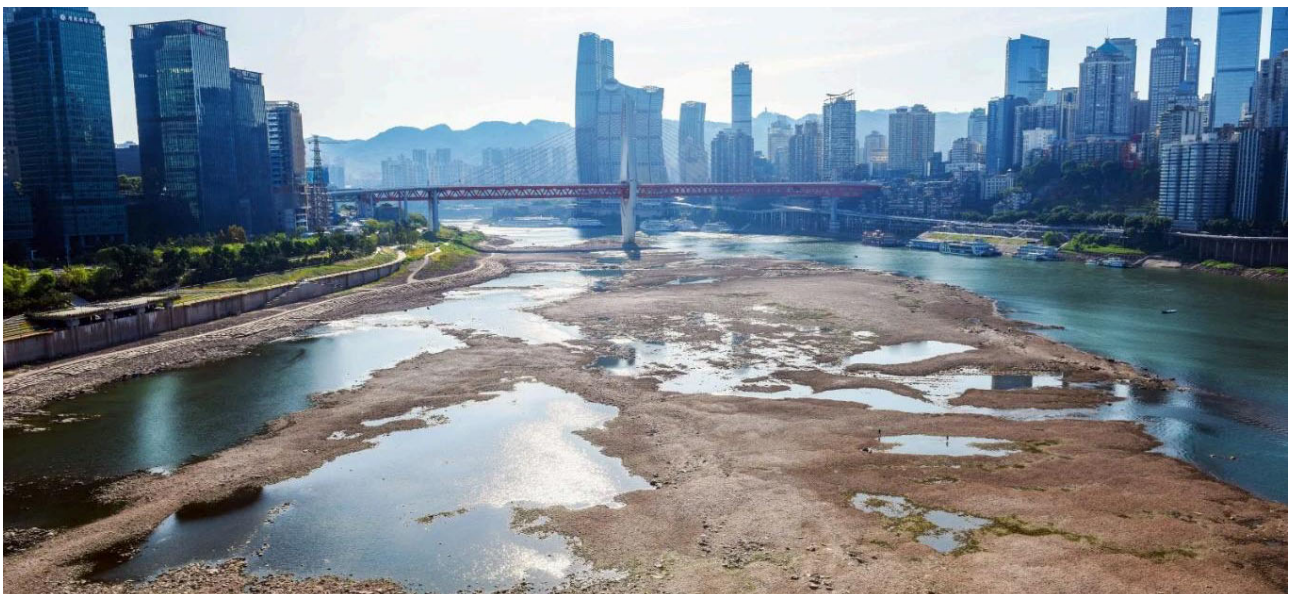
the localization of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) becomes ever more crucial, cities must be equipped – financially and institutionally – to align their actions with global water commitments and to actively contribute to the shared objectives.

Ensuring safe drinking water and sanitation for all (SDG 6)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established in 2015 by the United Nations as a global blueprint adopted by all UN member states to address pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. The 17 interconnected goals are designed to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They call on all stakeholders – including de facto LRGs – to work collaboratively toward the jointly set targets by 2030.

Advancing the Sustainable Development Goal on Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6) is imperative because safe water and

sanitation underpin nearly every dimension of human well-being and development. Universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene is a fundamental human right and the foundation of public health – recognized by the UNGA resolution “The Human Right to Water and Sanitation”. Without reliable access to clean water, communities face heightened risks of waterborne diseases, reduced life expectancy, and limited economic opportunities. SDG 6 is also tightly interconnected with goals such as poverty reduction, food security, and climate resilience.



As water scarcity intensifies due to population growth, pollution, and climate change, failure to act will exacerbate inequalities, strain ecosystems, and increase the likelihood of conflict over limited water resources. LRGs can play a decisive role in achieving SDG 6 by promoting water

conservation, reducing leakage, recycling wastewater, and integrating climate-adaptive planning. Inclusive urban policies can significantly reduce pressure on freshwater resources and ensure equitable access to sanitation and hygiene – especially in informal settlements.

The 2026 UN Water Conference: A Moment of Collective Action

As the world enters the final stretch of the 2030 Agenda, the 2026 United Nations Water Conference represents a decisive moment to make measurable proposals to advance SDG6. Co-hosted by the United Arab Emirates and Senegal, it will bring together governments, cities, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector to reinvigorate global momentum on water. Cities and their networks should have a place at the discussion table. They can influence the preparations of the Conference by reaching out to the co-hosting Member States and their authorities.

As the [President of the UN General Assembly put it at the UN 2023 Water Conference](#), “Innovative, affordable local solutions offer the best chance to solve water problems. Local, national, and regional policies that integrate water and related issues can provide the enabling environment needed to leverage positive externalities and strengthen multilateral cooperation for a sustainable and peaceful world.” Building on that, the 2026 edition might launch discussions on the creation of a non-binding framework with multi-stakeholder participation: local communities, indigenous peoples, civil society, local and national governments, and international organizations.

Water is a driver of economic growth and prosperity. Agriculture, industry, energy production, and health all depend on reliable and sustainably managed water resources. Efficient management, reuse, and investment in resilient infrastructure can generate significant socio-economic returns. Rivers, wetlands, forests, and aquifers regulate water

flows, filter pollutants, and buffer against extreme events. Yet these ecosystems are under severe threat, especially in urban areas. The Conference should strengthen the integration of water and environmental policies, promoting nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration as cost-effective and climate-resilient approaches at the local level.

[The Conference is a prime tool of water diplomacy](#) for peace and stability. Building resilient water and sanitation systems and diversifying water sources require increased, predictable and long-term financing. International cooperation must enable domestic resource mobilization, accessing blended finance, financing by NDBs and MDBs, and advancing public-private partnerships – while safeguarding public interest.



The themes of the United Nations 2026 Water Conference roundtables echo these considerations:

- Water for People
- Water for Prosperity
- Water for Planet
- Water for Cooperation
- Water and International Architecture
- Investments for Water

By convening in a spirit of solidarity, the Conference can help translate commitments into implementation to build a shared vision of a water-secure future for all. Its success will depend on concrete outcomes and strong partnerships. The multistakeholder consultation delivered very concrete additional thematic proposals reflected in UNDESA's [report](#) – as shown below. It is of high importance that LRGs continue providing their assessments to the chairs of the relevant roundtables and that Member States invite

local actors to the global discussions. Ensuring coherence between the SDGs, the Paris Agreement, and humanitarian action through stronger coordination across UN bodies is essential to maximize impact. Looking into the future, the conference might also serve as a platform for launching a discussion on the post-Agenda 2030 goals and priorities. Member States should avoid this time the delay in including LRGs in the policymaking process.



Word cloud on common themes mentioned by stakeholders in the online consultation, generated on WordArt.com.

Water and International Cooperation: A Strategic Imperative

Water issues lack a dedicated global governance framework within the UN system. The UN-Water is an important coordination mechanism but does not qualify by any means for a UN agency. Its role is to ensure that the United Nations 'delivers as one' in response to water-related challenges through three lines of work: informing policies, monitoring and reporting, and inspiring action.

Over 30 United Nations organizations carry out water and sanitation programs. The main purpose of [UN-Water](#) is to coordinate these activities, thereby creating synergies and maximizing efficiency. UN-Water also works with partners, including ICLEI and UCLG, to localize SDG 6 by empowering local and regional governments to manage water resources.

The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (UNECE, 1992) is currently the only global (open to all UN Member States since 2016), legally binding framework specifically dedicated to transboundary water cooperation. Entry into force: 6 October 1996

- Establishes legally binding obligations for States to:
 - Prevent, control and reduce transboundary impacts
 - Ensure equitable and reasonable use of shared waters
 - Cooperate through agreements, joint bodies, and data exchange
- Requires transboundary cooperation on rivers, lakes, and aquifers
- Integrates water quality, quantity, ecosystems, and climate resilience

The '[Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes](#)' has emerged as a trusted and inclusive framework for such cooperation. With 58 Parties, it provides a legal and institutional platform for countries to jointly manage shared water resources, exchange data, prevent disputes, and build resilience to climate change. Its growing membership reflects the recognition that shared waters require shared solutions.

Other institutional collaborations, such as the 'Water for Climate Action Initiative' by UNEP, UNECE, WMO and the COP Presidencies, are placing the human right to a healthy

environment and access to water and sanitation at the heart of their approach. UNEP aims to ensure coherent water-related action across the climate, biodiversity and desertification COPs, and to strengthen synergies across other related Multilateral Environmental Agreements.

As Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UNEP [put it in Belém](#): "We must take an urgent economy-wide approach across the entire water cycle. We need to involve all sectors and voices – including Indigenous Peoples, youth and civil society. Crucially, we must catalyze investments in water, particularly for solutions that lean on nature."

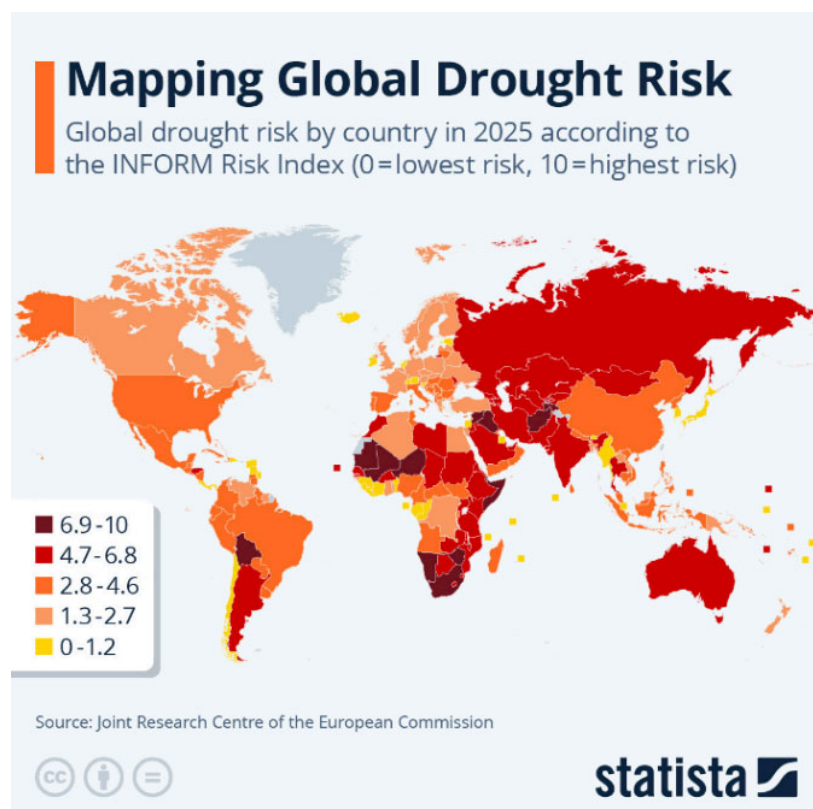
Initiatives for international water cooperation: WSC, GWH, and WEF

Urban water security

The [World Bank's Water Scarce Cities](#) (WSC) Initiative addresses urban water security by fostering knowledge sharing, providing toolboxes, and implementing integrated water management in water-stressed cities. The initiative highlights experiences from over 20 cities to promote sustainable, resilient, and circular economy-based solutions.

Its [Water Forward](#) global platform targets water security for one billion people by 2030 – focusing mostly on Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. It prioritizes reducing urban water loss, modernizing irrigation and expanding data-driven planning.

Sharing local best practices at the global level helps upscaling while avoiding repeating inefficient approaches. International cooperation is also essential for mobilizing finance, transferring technology, and strengthening capacity – especially in low- and middle-income countries. No country can address all water challenges in isolation. Global solidarity is needed to close the widening gap between water demand and sustainable supply.



Source: INFORM Risk Index / Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, via Statista.

Water for Peace

The [Geneva Water Hub](#) (GWH) is using water as a tool for building peace. By bringing people together to solve water challenges, they help ease tensions, build trust, and create the right conditions for lasting peace. Building on International Water Law, the Hub organizes talks, mediates disputes, and supports local communities to make water a key part of humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, and development. The GWH pushes for smarter water sharing and conservation,

showing how cooperation over water can help prevent conflicts. It also shapes policies and advocates laws, promoting cooperation across borders and sectors, and making sure everyone's right to clean water and sanitation is respected. One of their standout tools is the [Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructure](#) – a guide for protecting water sources during armed conflicts. Valuing water is more critical than ever.

Innovation for water

The [World Economic Forum](#) and Imperial College London presented the [Water-BOOST](#) (Bridging Opportunities and Optimising Support Toolkit), a systems-based approach that helps governments, regulators, entrepreneurs and investors strengthen the supporting environments that allow innovation to scale water-related solutions. Against a backdrop of climate change and

mounting water challenges, cities must embrace innovation to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of their water systems. Based on field research across six cities – San Francisco, Valencia, Barcelona, Singapore, Accra, and Bengaluru – WEF's [report](#) highlights the governance, financing, and collaborative approaches enabling lasting impact.

Policy Recommendations for States

1. Integrate Local and Regional Governments in International Water Cooperation Frameworks

LRGs should be considered as parties to and accelerators of implementation of global water conventions and other cooperative mechanisms, with a focus on transboundary waters, data sharing, and joint climate adaptation strategies.

2. Empower Cities as Key Actors in Water Governance

National governments and international partners should provide cities with the financial resources, technical capacity, and policy autonomy needed to localize SDG 6 and actively contribute to outcomes of the 2026 UN Water Conference.

3. Mobilize Scaled-Up and Innovative Financing for Water

The international community should significantly increase investment in water through blended finance, development banks, and innovative funding mechanisms, prioritizing resilient infrastructure, sanitation, and nature-based solutions – considering LRGs as partners in these endeavours.

4. Integrate the Localization of SDG6 Across Multilateral Agendas

Localization efforts should be systematically embedded in climate, biodiversity, health, and development processes, ensuring policy coherence and reinforcing the key role of LRGs in water-related processes in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Policy Recommendations for LRGs

1. Build the water crisis-management framework before you need it

Develop comprehensive water crisis-management frameworks before emergencies occur. This includes risk assessments, contingency planning, diversified water sources, and infrastructure upgrades designed for future climate and population scenarios.

2. Build trust and communicate the truth to the local population

Ensure consistent transparency, timely communication, and active engagement with the local population through accessible channels – especially in periods of uncertainty – to foster credibility and impactful long-term cooperation.

3. Embed a resilience approach into governance, budgeting, and policy

Plan proactively for shocks while maintaining flexibility to adapt to changing conditions. This includes applying foresight, allocating resources for risk prevention, strengthening institutions, and integrating resilience metrics into decision-making processes.

4. Engage in multilevel collaboration for maximum impact

Engage at different levels of multilateral cooperation to influence international debates on water, to ensure their urban concerns and specificities are taken into account, to enable exchange of practices among peers, and to contribute to relevant inter-governmental processes to leave no one behind.

Conclusion

Local issues, such as unsafe drinking water, inadequate wastewater treatment, and heightened exposure to diseases, are intensified by global challenges, like climate change, which is disrupting precipitation patterns, increasing droughts and floods, and exposing the limits of often outdated urban water systems. Rapid urbanization and population growth are also placing unprecedented strain on existing and future water and sanitation systems. Cities can contribute to global efforts by building local infrastructure in a sustainable and resilient manner.

Water is both a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, underpinning public health, economic productivity, food security, and ecosystem stability. Achieving SDG 6 is therefore critical, yet current progress is insufficient. LRGs play a frontline role as implementers; however, they need to step up as international decision-makers.

International cooperation on water is indispensable for wellbeing, economic prosperity, environmental protection, and global stability. The 2026 United Nations Water Conference offers a unique opportunity to galvanize action, renew solidarity, and place water at the heart of sustainable development. To advance, achieve and implement SDG6, we need to act locally. The decisions taken and partnerships forged at the Conference will shape water security for generations to come.

Moving forward, a combination of inclusive governance, sustainable financing, and international cooperation will be essential to ensure water security, reduce inequalities, and prevent conflict over scarce resources. As for the role of LRGs, GCH calls for shifting from implementers to contributors and from declarations to participation in global water governance. Because when global water decisions fail, it is the local communities that feel the impact first.

Annex: Selected International Water-Related Agreements

INSTRUMENT	ENTRY INTO FORCE
Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (UN Water Convention, 1992 – originally UNECE)	6 October 1996
Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UN Watercourses Convention, 1997)	17 August 2014
2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Sustainable Development Goal 6 (2015)	Adopted: 2015
Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention, 1971)	21 December 1975
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992)	21 March 1994
Paris Agreement (2015)	4 November 2016
UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292 – The Human Right to Water and Sanitation (2010)	Adopted: 28 July 2010
Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols (1949 / 1977)	1950 / 1978
Convention Establishing the Niger Basin Authority (1980)	1982
Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (1995)	5 April 1995
EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC)	22 December 2000



Global Cities Hub
Villa Rigot
Avenue de la Paix 9
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

info@globalcitieshub.org
+41 (0) 22 559 46 00

www.globalcitieshub.org