Consultation Meeting:
Midterm Review of the
UN Water Action
Decade for Asia and the Pacific

April 2022
The United Nations 2023 Water Conference, co-hosted by the Governments of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Kingdom of the Netherlands, will be held in New York from 22 to 24 March 2023. It aims at providing a comprehensive mid-term review of the implementation of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028.

The UN 2023 Water conference is mandated by General Assembly resolutions 73/226 of 20 December 2018 and 75/212 of 21 December 2020, the latter specifying that it shall be preceded by regional preparatory meetings. The conference modalities call for the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including Governments, the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations, etc. The Conference is coordinated by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

The Regional Commissions have been invited to provide regional input to the Secretary General’s report on the mid-term review to be presented at the 77th session of the General Assembly by the end of June 2022. These Secretariat-led inputs aim to reflect the diversity of views and experiences from the regions and not any agreed position from the region.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific (ESCAP) is facilitating the Asia-Pacific regional preparatory process. These inputs aim to reflect the diversity of views and experiences from the regions.

In this regard, the ESCAP Secretariat prepared a zero draft input document highlighting the region’s progress on the International Decade for Action on Water, gaps in implementation, best practices, as well as recommendations to accelerate the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation. The zero draft input document was submitted for a written consultation to experts nominated by ESCAP Member and Associate Member States, as well as members of the UN-Water Asia-Pacific Regional Discussion Group during a written consultation.

ESCAP compiled and incorporated comments into the development of the first draft input document, which was presented and further discussed at a regional online multi-stakeholder consultation attended by nominated experts from member and Associate States as well as members of the UN-Water Asia-Pacific Regional Discussion Group.

This report presents the main discussions held during the consultation meeting for Asia and the Pacific.
Regional Consultation Process

The consultation process was organized from 4 March 2022 to 20 April 2022. The process included a written consultation process, as well as a virtual meeting.

The Secretariat received 120 in-depth review comments on the zero draft document over a period of one month.

Feedback was received from experts nominated by member and associate member States: Cook Islands, Georgia, Japan, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand, and the United States of America.

Inputs were also received from other stakeholders: Asia-Pacific Water Forum (APWF), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Global Water Partnership (GWP), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Association of Hydrologists (IAH), International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Water Resources Association (IWRA), UNESCO, UN-Habitat, and Water.org.

The virtual consultation for the review of the first draft input document was held on 20 April 2022.

The meeting was attended by the following member States and associate member States of ESCAP including their nominated experts: Australia; China; Georgia; Indonesia; Kyrgyzstan; Nepal; Russian Federation; Tajikistan; Thailand; Singapore; Sri Lanka; United States of America; and Uzbekistan.

Additional participants included members of the UN-Water Asia-Pacific Regional Discussion Group: Asia-Pacific Water Forum (APWF); International Labour Organization (ILO); International Organization for Migration (IOM); UNESCO; World Health Organization (WHO).
The Secretariat presented the structure of the first draft input document and the outcome of the written consultation.

Since the themes of the interactive dialogues for the UN Water Conference are not yet decided upon, the ESCAP Secretariat decided to use two of the proposed themes for the interactive dialogues for the UN Water Conference, as presented in the Zero draft non-paper on interactive dialogues, to ensure an as encompassing review as possible, namely:

- Accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework: Financing, Data and information, Capacity, Innovation and Governance; and
- Water-related SDG targets and global agreements: Water and sanitation, State of water resources and freshwater ecosystems, Transboundary water management and Integrated Water Resource Management (WRM), Water, climate and disaster risk reduction and Water and peace.

The key messages from the first draft input document were summarised as follows:

1. **The Region is Not on Track to Achieve SDG 6.** The document highlights that action is needed to reverse negative trends in water-use efficiency (SDG 6.4), protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems (SDG 6.6), and participation in water and sanitation management (SDG 6.b). A large number of people still lacks access to safely managed drinking water services and basic handwashing facilities – the negative trend in water and sanitation is attributed to increased water stress. The persistent challenge of resource use inefficiency in the Asia-Pacific is reflected in the region’s performance on responsible consumption and production. The need for participatory water and sanitation management in addition to water accounting and allocation is highly stressed.

2. **WASH is Still Struggling to Reach Rural and Remote Communities.** In East and Southeast Asia, access to water and sanitation hygiene (WASH) services increased to 60 percent in 2021 from 21 percent in 2000. In Central and South Asia, access to WASH services increased to 47 percent in 2021 from 13 percent in 2000. While WASH has made significant gains in the region, with an estimated 900 million people gaining access to improved WASH since 2000, this increase has been more consistent across Asia whereas pervasive challenges still exist in the Pacific. In the Pacific, 63 percent of the population have either limited or no access to WASH services. This reality is most prevalent in schools where 83 percent of children have limited or no access to WASH services.

3. **Water Scarcity is the Region’s Greatest Concern.** The document emphasizes that the most critical issue facing water resources and freshwater ecosystems in the Asia-Pacific today is increasing water scarcity. Ten countries in the Asia-Pacific region fall under the category of high baseline water stress or extremely high baseline water stress. Data on water withdrawals in the region is extremely limited as most water abstraction is not monitored. Water scarcity in the region is likely to increase due to the positive correlation between water extraction and population growth, as an increasing population drives demand for food – noting that agriculture currently accounts for 85%
percent of abstracted groundwater in most Asian countries.

4. **IWRM Implementation is Improving.** While the implementation of integrated water resource management has improved across the region, challenges remain high due to limited adoption of water policy instruments complimented with gaps in financial commitment. Approximately two-thirds of countries in the region have no formal requirements for monitoring and evaluation of dedicated water policies – which limits the capacity to assess the effective of policies and potentially implement remedial actions.

5. **Transboundary Water Resources Need Attention.** Asia is home to 57 transboundary river basins, however, only ten river basins are covered by basin-wide agreements and fifteen of them are only partially covered by a basin agreement – leaving the remaining 32 river basins (56 percent) without any basin agreement. Transboundary aquifers in Asia also experience high AQSI (AQSI defined as groundwater exploitation rate divided by aquifer recharge rate); approximately over 50 percent of Asia’s aquifers report high AQSI rates – indicating significant gaps in water policy and agreements for transboundary aquifers.

6. **Water, Climate, and Disaster Risk Reduction.** In Asia, between 1970 and 2019, 3,454 water-related disasters were recorded by the WMO amounting to 975,622 lives lost and USD 1.2 trillion in reported economic damages. Storms had the highest negative impact on life, causing 72 percent of lives lost, while floods lead to the greatest economic losses. Of all the countries that experienced a climate disaster, 91 percent occurred in developing countries. Between 2019 and 2017, Australia experienced 7 out of the 10 top economic losses in the South-West Pacific, while the Philippines and Indonesia reported the highest loss of life – highlighting inherent inequalities in the ability to cope with the impact of natural disasters.

7. **Water and Peace.** The implications of deficient transboundary water management also raise concerns of the relationship between water and conflict as hydrological changes to due upstream water infrastructure developments – such as dams for irrigation or hydropower, creating adverse downstream impacts on agriculture, cropping, biodiversity, erosion, fisheries, and water quality (salinization) – can create conflicts between upstream and downstream users.

8. **Key Themes for Recommendations.** Key themes for recommendations to accelerate progress on SDG 6 and the UN Water Action Decade in the Asia-Pacific include: managing competing uses of scarce water resources; encouraging greater stakeholder engagement inclusive processes; encouraging multi-stakeholder partnerships; encouraging greater transboundary cooperation; encouraging greater scientific investigation of key challenges; ensuring coherent policy making between interests; ensuring consistency across water goals, and social, economic, and development goals; ensuring policies are coupled with solid financial commitments; improving data collection – for monitoring SDG 6 progress, water accounting and allocation, optimizing allocation for prioritization of uses by economic, social, and environmental value.
Group Discussions on Recommendations to Accelerate Progress on SDG 6 and on the UN Water Action Decade in Asia and the Pacific

The following subsections summarize feedback and suggestions from delegates (Annex I) during the consultation’s group discussions. Inputs received during the group discussions will be reviewed and incorporated into the second draft input document.

1. Governance and Cooperation

A participant highlighted the need to include the appropriate and multi-dimensional cooperative users in water governance into the input document.

Another participant highlighted the need for multi-scale and multi-stakeholder management of water resources to ensure water efficiency and resilience through integrated water resource management and ecosystem-based adaptation.

Another participant suggested to delete Paragraph 1 under Section 5 (Water and Peace) due to lack of scientific background. Suggestions were made to revise the flow of the said paragraph, find additional literature that can support the written information, and change the section’s title (Water and Peace) to Water and (Transboundary) Cooperation.

Finally, one participant commented generally on the organisation of the regional consultation and the content of the document.

2. Policy Coherence

A participant recommended to highlight solutions achieving policy coherence at subnational and national level, namely the need for “whole of government approaches”, whilst noting that there is no “one solution fits all” solution to achieve this.

A sharing of the dialogue process in Australia pointed out the importance of the beneficiaries of good water management and including them take part of the water challenge.

Another participant highlighted the focus of water as a technical issue. There is a failure to recognize that water has social and political backdrops – emphasizing the need to include expertise from different sectors in managing water issues, not just technical experts. The participant also highlighted the need to highlight the role of water in climate mitigation —and not just adaptation and disaster management issues.

3. Data and Innovation
A participant shared that their own country’s plans for innovation is similar to what has been written in the input document which includes collaboration between government, the private sector, and other stakeholders. The participant also mentioned that the increase of digitalization has contributed to the inclusion of stakeholders in the planning process.

An assessment on the gaps written in the input document was made by a delegate citing that the current situation of the Asia-Pacific is far from the goals of 2028. It was noted that the Asia-Pacific region is falling short on its goals and data and innovation can be the catalyst to accelerate in achieving the goals. It was further noted by the participant that technology can still have barriers which are common in different countries, but that technology and digitalization are tools to connect and innovate.

A participant shared an experience of working in one of the water-stressed parts of their country – noting that while the country has various policies on water, full implementation does not occur due to the lack of community participation and lack of adequate financing for the maintenance and operation of water-related facilities.

A participant noted how well the document was revised and pointed out that the gaps indicated were a reflection on what is currently happening. There should be more input from the scientific community on the policymaking process as this process in the water sector proves challenging due to other connected factors such as agriculture and climate change.

4. Institutional Strengthening and Sector Professionalization

A participant noted that the narrative for this section was too general and additional specificity was needed for impact. More attention to younger generations was also highlighted, stating that professionalization and accreditation starting at high school level should be considered as youth are a source of dynamic innovation – stressing that younger generations are already digitally adept. The need to equip youth/professionals with the ability to access technological advances in fields such as AI, machine learning, and other growing technological fields was also noted – requiring a multi/intersectoral approach, engaging and integrating with institutions beyond the water sector.

Participants discussed the need to enhance wastewater design, management, operation and maintenance and the need for strategies to attract financing and investment in wastewater treatment.

Participants also discussed the need for the development of capacities in communication to address inclusion / equity in accessing financial resources – noting that capacity building will need to take a number of forms, integrating to other sectors.

Participants also noted that transboundary aquifer/groundwater cooperation is a key issue for the region. Improvements to the current context will require capacity building across multiple themes and areas from the technical to the legal to the diplomatic sphere.

5. Gender and Finance

Participants expressed the need for governments to implement policies to attract investments in the water sector to make it more competitive for development finance. Water needs to be seen more as a whole-of-government issue not just issue for ministers involved with water resources. Participants stressed that government resources cannot be allocated for water-related projects without more support from other ministers. To make the case for water and WASH investments without compromising other issues (e.g., health, education, etc.), efforts to make other ministers realize the importance of water is needed.

Participants pointed out that this section should include that progress towards SDG 6 targets provides opportunities for women’s full
participation in the economy – contributing to a more productive society.

6. **Integrated Approaches to Water, the SDGs, and Other Water-Related Agendas**

One suggestion was made to highlight the need to increase focus on wastewater management.
Next steps

Subsequent to the written and online consultations, next steps in the consultation process include:

**28 April - 13 May 2022:** The second draft document, incorporating comments received during the online consultation meeting, will be circulated by the ESCAP Secretariat for a last round of written comments.

**20 May 2022:** Finalization of the second draft, based on written comments received, will be circulated by the ESCAP Secretariat to all consultation participants.

**End of May 2022:** Based on the second draft input document, ESCAP will provide input to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) Secretariat – the party leading the preparatory process for the 2023 Water Conference. The input will inform the UN Secretary General’s Report on the Midterm Review to be presented at the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly as well as the United Nations 2023 Water Conference.