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Committee on Water Resources
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**Midterm comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade
in the Arab region**

Summary

On 21 December 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 71/222 on the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028, commonly referred to as the Water Action Decade, to focus on water-related Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The resolution specifies that the Decade should be pursued through cooperation and partnerships at all levels, with a focus on the achievement of socioeconomic and environmental goals. The United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action (2023 Water Conference) was held in New York from 22 to 24 March 2023 on the theme “Water for Sustainable Development”. The primary objective of the 2023 Water Conference was to assess progress towards the internationally agreed water goals and commitments to accelerate their achievement in the second half of the decade. Representatives from Arab member States attended the Conference, participating in interactive dialogues, plenary sessions and side events. Several commitments involving Arab States and organizations serving Arab States are included in the Water Action Agenda.

The Committee on Water Resources is invited to provide suggestions on areas of work that it would like the secretariat of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to pursue in relation to the fulfilment of Water Action Decade goals.

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Introduction

1. On 21 December 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted [resolution 71/222](#) on the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028, commonly referred to as the Water Action Decade, to focus on water-related Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The resolution specifies that the Decade should be pursued through cooperation and partnerships at all levels, with a focus on the achievement of socioeconomic and environmental goals.
2. Since that date, international and regional efforts have been made towards advancing the achievement of water-related goals.

I. United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action

3. On 20 December 2018, the General Assembly adopted [resolution 73/226](#) on the midterm comprehensive review of the implementation of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028”, deciding that it would take place from 22 to 24 March 2023 as the first United Nations Water Conference to be held since 1977 (Mar del Plata, Argentina).
4. Resolution 73/226 calls for a report to be prepared by the Secretary-General, UN-Water, the regional commissions and other entities of the United Nations system to assess progress on fulfilling water-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the first half of the decade. Preparatory events at the global, regional and national levels were encouraged in advance of the 2023 Water Conference. The resolution also requests that the President of the General Assembly hold a high-level meeting in 2021 to promote the implementation of water-related SDGs in support of the Decade, and to inform the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development of the outcomes. The high-level meeting was held in New York on 18 March 2021, with contributions from representatives of Arab States.

A. Global preparations

5. General Assembly [resolution 75/212](#) of 21 December 2020 details the procedures of the United Nations Water Conference. It stipulates that the Conference should report on progress made in implementing the Decade's objectives and identify challenges in achieving the objectives and potential solutions to support their implementation. The resolution also calls for regional and global meetings to precede the Conference, in addition to review procedures. The General Assembly convened a preparatory meeting in late 2022 to set the themes and structure of the midterm comprehensive review.
6. According to the 2023 Water Conference Vision Statement, the Conference aimed to assess progress made on the implementation of Decade objectives, identify challenges and obstacles as well as opportunities and innovations, exchange views, develop actions to accelerate Decade goal implementation, enhance means of implementation and cooperation, share ongoing efforts and best practices, and encourage States and other relevant stakeholders to make voluntary commitments.
7. Climate change was identified as a key Conference theme. Given its impact on economies, societies, the environment and water, the Conference secretariat identified climate change as “the biggest deal breaker” to achieving internationally agreed upon water-related goals and targets.
8. In preparation for the Conference, on 24 October 2022, more than 1,200 stakeholders participated in a virtual and in-person stakeholder consultation at the United Nations Headquarters. Participants took part in five round tables to share and discuss proposals on potential game changers for the Water Action Agenda, based on the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework: capacity development, governance, data and information, financing and innovation.

9. It was also determined that the Conference would feature five high-level interactive dialogues focused on the following themes: water for health, water for sustainable development, water for climate resilience and the environment, water for cooperation, and accelerating the implementation of the Decade objectives. Concept papers for each of these themes were prepared by the United Nations System and submitted to Member States and stakeholders for their comprehensive review.

10. The Water Action Agenda was identified as a key outcome of the Conference. It is a compilation of voluntary commitments, pledges and actions by States and other stakeholders to support the implementation of SDG 6 and other water-related goals.

B. Regional preparations

11. The Water Action Decade was welcomed by Arab States given the urgency of ensuring water security to advance sustainable development in the region, and given the accompanying water challenges the region faces. Regional engagement in the Decade is demonstrated by resolutions and recommendations adopted by Arab States in intergovernmental and regional forums, including by the Arab Ministerial Water Council (AMWC), the Committee on Water Resources of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and regional initiatives, forums and consultations on water.

12. At its twelfth session (Amman, 22–24 March 2017), the Committee on Water Resources adopted a recommendation requesting that ESCWA support the Water Action Decade, including by funding member State participation in Decade-related activities, and helping member States to achieve SDG 6 and other water-related SDGs. At its thirteenth and fourteenth sessions (Beirut, 27–28 June 2019; and 29–30 September 2021, respectively), the Committee also requested that ESCWA support member States in achieving the Water Action Decade objectives. This entailed coordinating regional preparations for the comprehensive midterm review by organizing and hosting an Arab regional preparatory meeting, and through participation in regional forums.

13. At its tenth session (Kuwait City, 2 May 2018), AMWC adopted a resolution that encouraged Arab States and stakeholders to share their best practices and efforts to advance the water-related dimensions of the 2030 Agenda, and to disseminate their activities on the Water Action Decade knowledge platform. Moreover, in its twelfth and thirteenth sessions (Cairo, 27 November 2020; and 26 October 2021, respectively), AMWC invited Arab States and its technical secretariat to engage with ESCWA to prepare for the midterm comprehensive review of the Decade. ESCWA was invited to support member States in engaging in the Decade, and to coordinate regional preparations for its comprehensive midterm review through an Arab regional preparatory meeting (Beirut, 18–19 May 2022). The results of this meeting contributed to the United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action (New York, 22–24 March 2023).

14. The [initial regional meeting](#) supporting the Water Action Decade was hosted by ESCWA (Beirut, 28–29 March 2018) in preparation for a review of SDG 6 progress at the 2018 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The meeting resulted in an outcome document that consolidated regional views and priorities on water-related issues facing the Arab region. The following four priority areas were identified: strengthening integrated water resources management to cope with water scarcity; enhancing cooperation on shared water resources; water as a core component of climate change adaptation and natural disaster risk reduction; and access to water services for all by improving water-related infrastructure.

15. In response to regional mandates, ESCWA established a regional inter-agency multi-stakeholder consultative group to support regional preparations for the midterm comprehensive review. Group members included the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD), the AMWC technical secretariat, the Arab Network for Environment and Development (RAED), the Arab Water Council (AWC), the Center for Environment and Development for the Arab Region and Europe (CEDARE), the Cairo Water

Week secretariat/Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation of Egypt; the Food and Agriculture Organization's Regional Office for Near East and North Africa (FAO-RNE), the International Association of Hydrogeologists (IAH), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), the International Water Resources Association (IWRA), the International Federation of Private Water Operators (AquaFed), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN-Water secretariat, the Water Sciences and Technology Association (WSTA), the World Bank, and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

16. The consultative group convened several regional meetings and events that supported greater understanding and active support for the Water Action Decade. These events contributed to the development of an Arab regional roadmap of events that led up to the regional midterm comprehensive review.

17. Other regional forums were also convened and contributed to preparations for the midterm comprehensive review of the Decade. This included the fifth Arab Water Forum (Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 21–23 September 2021); the High-level Meeting on Water Scarcity in the Arab Region (Cairo, 14–18 November 2021), and the fourteenth Gulf Water Conference (Riyadh, 13–15 February 2022). Cairo Water Week (CWW) in 2021 and 2022 also made contributions to regional preparations for the Decade. CWW 2021 concluded with a commitment by the Egyptian Government to continue drafting relevant recommendations in support of the midterm comprehensive review. The outcome document was sent to the Secretary-General of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference and to the co-hosts, the Governments of the Netherlands and of Tajikistan. At CWW 2022, high-level policy dialogues for water-scarce countries were convened, and senior representatives from the Netherlands and Tajikistan participated therein. These dialogues finalized the Cairo Call for Action, which was submitted by Egypt as an input to the 2023 Water Conference.

18. The formal Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade was hosted by ESCWA (Beirut, 18–19 May 2022) to assess regional progress towards the Decade objectives, and to discuss related challenges, opportunities and ways to accelerate achievement. The meeting outcomes fed into a document that informed the global process, including the United Nations Secretary-General's report on the midterm comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade.

19. The regional preparatory meeting brought together representatives of 18 Arab States from relevant ministries and national institutions, and representatives of regional and international organizations, United Nations organizations, international and regional financial institutions, academia, the private sector, and civil society. The key messages and recommendations emanating from the meeting were grouped under six thematic priorities and four accelerators to move towards the achievement of internationally agreed water-related goals. The six thematic priorities are: integrated water resource management (IWRM); water for all; transboundary water cooperation, water and climate change; water-use efficiency and water resource management; and water across sectors/non-conventional water resources. The four accelerators are: financing water; data to inform decision-making, monitoring and implementation; innovation; and capacity development and regional knowledge networks.

20. Regarding the six thematic priorities, IWRM was identified as essential for alleviating the impact of water scarcity and improving water security in the Arab region. Reporting demonstrated that despite progress in IWRM implementation, the region still needs to double its implementation rate to reach the SDG 6 target on IWRM by 2030. Achieving this objective requires more dedicated financing for the water sector. Furthermore, water resource management cannot be left to one ministry alone, and cross-sectoral cooperation is essential. An all-of-government and all-of-society approach is needed. Despite being ahead of global averages on SDG 6 targets on access to water and sanitation services, significant disparities remain between urban and rural areas in the region, and areas where conflict and occupation present barriers to ensuring access to these services. Transboundary water cooperation was identified as a pressing challenge facing Arab countries, which are largely downstream in transboundary water basins. Science-based water diplomacy can promote cooperation on water, and science-based assessments should be used to inform action on water and climate. National authorities working on water and climate issues are encouraged to collaborate on the

development of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and national adaptation plans (NAPs). Efforts towards water-use efficiency and water resource management require improving monitoring and water-use efficiency across sectors, and ensuring better cost recovery. Better management of the water sector, including more efficient irrigation systems, is also crucial. For water across sectors/non-conventional water resources, work should be done to promote the use of non-conventional water sources in water-scarce countries via technology transfer. Financing needs to be made available to make this expansion of water infrastructure possible, in addition to a public policy push to normalize the use of non-conventional water sources in relation to food production.

21. For the four accelerators, financing water is a major challenge in the region, which is now burdened by \$1.4 trillion of debt. International concessional funding is needed, as well as public and private investment in the water sector. Water policies must be informed in order to be actionable. Accelerating implementation means increasing access to data and analysis through digital platforms and online tools. For instance, the ESCWA collaborative [RICCAR](#) initiative provides open access to regional climate projections and geospatial datasets, which have informed impact and vulnerability assessments on water resources at the regional, country and basin levels. Innovation can drive transition into more sustainable water management in water scarce countries. However, there is a need to foster an enabling environment to encourage innovation, technology access, and private sector engagement in the water sector. Innovation should draw upon local solutions and indigenous knowledge. Opportunities also exist for localizing the desalination industry to reduce costs and energy/carbon footprints. Small and medium enterprises and economic diversification can drive innovation programmes and reduce the price of technologies to make them more commercially viable and easily deployable. Moreover, capacity development and regional knowledge networks are crucial. Water education, especially educating young people about groundwater, should be a standard practice. Water diplomacy training will help address climate and water security challenges in the region, and farmers should be trained on modernizing irrigation systems.

II. 2023 Water Conference outcomes

22. The 2023 Water Conference was held at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 22 to 24 March 2023. Member State representatives were invited to express their commitments to the Water Action Decade at the plenaries and through the online portal, where voluntary commitments by countries and organizations are recorded. Five interactive dialogues and hundreds of side events were also convened at the Conference. The outcomes of the five interactive dialogues were outlined at the closing session and summarized below.

23. Interactive dialogue 1 on water for health provided recommendations on improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). This included a call for development partners and Governments to increase investment in WASH, ensuring access for vulnerable populations, and to offer capacity development for workers in the water sector. Data should be used to inform decision-making in the sector, and there are opportunities to advocate for WASH innovations.

24. Interactive dialogue 2 on water for sustainable development focused on the need to strengthen IWRM and to learn from indigenous practices. Water reuse and improved water efficiency should be de facto considerations for all economic sectors, including agriculture. All sectoral investment strategies should be “water smart”. Going forward, stakeholders must work together to address increasing water needs in urban centres.

25. Interactive dialogue 3 on water for climate, resilience and environment was co-chaired by the Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation of Egypt. Its outcomes highlighted the need for science-based global information systems that document the impact of climate change on water resources. Science-informed decision-making is key to addressing challenges like water scarcity. Moreover, the need for climate financing in the water sector is crucial. Environmental accounting should be used to communicate climate impacts and the need for funding. Loss and damage financing mechanisms are crucial to ensuring future investment in the water sector.

26. Interactive dialogue 4 on water for cooperation was moderated by the Executive Secretary of ESCWA. The dialogue focused on key themes, including the value of cooperation for development, the impact of demographic pressures, cooperation around water as a form of conflict prevention, and using science to reinforce cross-boundary cooperation. Key recommendations included accelerating efforts to establish and strengthen transboundary cooperation agreements, and improving finance for transboundary water cooperation projects.

27. Interactive dialogue 5 on the Water Action Decade identified the water crisis as both global and local in nature, with the global water cycle serving as a global common good. It also highlighted the need to improve understanding of water's true value as a step towards developing more efficient water pricing and subsidy schemes. The recommendations from the dialogue included a call for the United Nations to appoint a Special Envoy for Water, empower UN-Water to engage more deeply on the achievement of water-related goals, and to convene more regular global water meetings.

A. Arab region participation at the 2023 Water Conference

28. Arab States played a key role at the 2023 Water Conference, with representatives from ESCWA member States participating actively in the interactive dialogues and plenary sessions. Representatives of several Arab States also organized and participated in 19 side events.

29. On 24 March 2023, the AMWC technical secretariat, ESCWA and the Islamic Development Bank organized a side event on the theme “[Arab region joint commitment to accelerate achievement of water security for sustainable development](#)”. The side event highlighted the Arab region's endeavours to adopt transformative commitments and build cross-sectoral partnerships to further strengthen collective action on water in the Arab region. It also highlighted commitments by Arab States and organizations to the Water Action Agenda. The Head of the Technical Secretariat of the Arab Ministerial Water Council of the League of Arab States and the Executive Secretary of ESCWA opened the event, which featured statements by eight Arab ministers responsible for water and by senior representatives from Arab Governments and financial institutions.

30. The five United Nations Regional Commissions collaborated on a side event entitled “[Regional dialogue on accelerating implementation of the Water Action Agenda](#)” on 24 March 2023. The Executive Secretary of ESCWA reviewed the means of implementation for achieving progress under the Water Action Decade within the regional context. The Arab region was represented by the Deputy Minister for Water of Saudi Arabia and the Executive Director of the “Iraq's Thirst” initiative, a non-governmental organization. The side event closed with a formal ceremony to mark the accession of Iraq to the United Nations Water Convention, making Iraq the first Arab country to join the convention. The executive secretaries of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and of ESCWA were present for the handover of the accession document to the United Nations Treaty Section.

B. Arab commitments to the Water Action Agenda

31. At the Arab region side event held on 24 March 2023, ESCWA and the League of Arab States jointly announced the launch of the Arab Initiative for Mobilizing Climate Finance for Water (AIM Climate Finance for Water), in partnership with the Islamic Development Bank and the Green Climate Fund, as a Water Action Agenda commitment. FAO and the Government of Sweden also joined the initiative as partners. The commitment will inform and foster efforts to secure greater climate finance for the water sector and water-dependent sectors in Arab countries. This includes the production of a climate finance brief on the water sector, and the organization of a regional climate finance forum on water for Arab States in 2023. Tailored training and technical support on water and adaptation will then be delivered to Arab States to support the preparation of bankable water projects for climate finance.

32. The Water Action Agenda includes at least 20 commitments by Arab States and organizations supporting them. Commitments with Arab Governments identified as the main proponent include the following:

(a) Egypt submitted the Action on Water Adaptation and Resilience (AWARe) initiative as a Water Action Agenda commitment. AWARe aims to decrease water losses worldwide, improve water supply, propose and support the implementation of agreed policy and methods for water cooperation, and promote cooperation and interlinkages between water and climate action to achieve the 2030 Agenda, particularly SDG 6. The commitment was also launched as an Egyptian initiative for the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference, which was hosted and chaired by Egypt in Sharm El-Sheikh;

(b) Saudi Arabia leads on two commitments, namely decarbonization in the desalination sector to reduce emissions by 56 per cent by 2024 and the remaining 44 per cent by 2030; and addressing water security in arid and water-stressed areas. The latter commitment focuses on reducing water demand by optimizing water usage in agricultural production, increasing water supplies from desalination, and strengthening water system resilience by improving portfolio planning and water system monitoring. Both commitments are being led by the Saline Water Conversion Corporation, a government entity;

(c) Somalia made a commitment to identify groundwater resources by using oil data. Implemented by the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources, the initiative will support the country's development by identifying drilling locations, and fostering knowledge and competency exchange on deep groundwater resources throughout the project's duration;

(d) The Sudan, through its Ministry of Health, committed to supporting a government initiative to provide sanitation services for everyone in the country, including on highways, markets and public places.

33. The preparations and outcomes of the 2023 Water Conference will inform the preparation of the tenth ESCWA Water Development Report, which focuses on the regional midterm comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade, associated outcomes of the Water Conference, and ways to accelerate the implementation of the internationally agreed water-related goals and objectives of the Water Action Decade.

III. Recommendations

34. The Committee on Water Resources is invited to advise on further areas of work that the ESCWA secretariat should pursue in relation to the Water Action Decade, and to provide suggestions on how to advance the implementation of current areas of work by ESCWA member States and the ESCWA secretariat.

35. To that end, the Committee on Water Resources may wish to consider the following recommendations:

(a) Share with ESCWA success stories and lessons learned from national efforts to support the Water Action Decade for inclusion in the tenth issue of the ESCWA Water Development Report;

(b) Encourage ESCWA member States that have submitted commitments to the Water Action Agenda to share their experiences on progress towards their implementation at the next Committee session;

(c) Increase support for measures and interventions that can enhance water security to tackle growing water scarcity in the region, including preparing bankable project pipelines for water sector projects, with a focus on the effects of climate change on water-dependent sectors and water security;

(d) Identify opportunities and challenges for advancing progress on integrated water resource management at the transboundary, national and subnational levels, and share related experiences at the next Committee session.

36. The Committee on Water Resources may also wish to discuss how the ESCWA secretariat can support member States, for example through the following:

(a) Offering support to implement commitments submitted by ESCWA member States to the Water Action Agenda;

(b) Ensuring the coordination and implementation of the AIM Climate Finance for Water commitment under the Water Action Agenda, in collaboration with the League of Arab States, the Islamic Development Bank, the Green Climate Fund, FAO, the Government of Sweden, and other collaborating institutions;

(c) Coordinating with the custodians of global reporting on SDG target 6.5 to prepare an updated regional report on progress in achieving the target in the Arab region;

(d) Expanding the regional knowledge base and opportunities for regional dialogue to address water security challenges, achieving the internationally agreed goals identified under the Water Action Decade through science-based and evidence-based tools, and sharing experiences from ESCWA member States and from inclusive consultations with regional water stakeholders.
