UNITED NATIONS

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Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/CL1.CCS/2022/WG.6/
Outcome document
12 September 2022
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Midterm Comprehensive Review
of the Water Action Decade
Beirut, 18-19 May 2022

Outcome Document

The Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade was held on 18 and 19 May 2022 in hybrid modality at the United Nations House in Beirut and online. The meeting was organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in collaboration with the League of Arab States and following several consultation meetings held by the regional inter-agency, multi-stakeholder Water Action Decade consultation group. This group, established by ESCWA to support regional preparations for the midterm comprehensive review, is comprised of designated representatives of regional and international organizations, as well as United Nations organizations that serve in the Technical Scientific and Advisory Committee of the Arab Ministerial Water Council (AMWC), members of the Regional Collaborative Platform/Issues-based Coalition (RCP-IBC) working on water issues, and members of the UN-Water Regional Discussion Group for Arab States.[1]

The meeting was attended by representatives of 18 Arab States from relevant ministries and national institutions; as well as senior representatives from relevant regional and national organizations, United Nations organizations, international and regional financial institutions, academia, private-sector and civil-society organizations engaged in water-related issues affecting Arab States. Regional priorities and progress on internationally agreed water-related goals were addressed, with the aim of informing the global midterm review of the Water Action Decade, which is due to take place during the United Nations 2023 Water Conference (New York, 22-24 March 2023). Discussions covered status updates on water security and integrated water resources management (IWRM) in the region; access to water supply and sanitation, especially under crisis; regional progress on transboundary water cooperation and climate action; connecting water across sectors; and improving water use efficiency. Additionally, discussions addressed the main accelerators for progressing towards achieving the goals of the Decade, including water financing, innovation and knowledge promotion, networking, and capacity development.

[1] The consultation group is comprised of representatives of AMWC, Food and Agriculture Organization Regional Office for Near East and North Africa (FAO-RNE), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN-Water, World Bank Group (WB), Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD), Arab Water Council (AWC), Centre for Environment and Development for the Arab Region and Europe (CEDARE), Cairo Water Week (CWW), Arab Network for Environment and Development (RAED), International Water Management Institute (IWMI), World Meteorological Organization (WMO), International Association of Hydrogeologists (IAH), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Water Resources Association (IWRA), International Federation of Private Water Operators (AquaFed), and Water Sciences & Technology Association (WSTA).

The meeting highlighted the importance of IWRM, and of ensuring availability and access to data, encouraging innovation and technologies, facilitating access to water financing, implementing capacity development, promoting knowledge on water, and encouraging cross-sectoral cooperation for achieving the goals of the Decade.

The following are the key messages resulting from the meeting, as well as from other regional events organized within the context of the Water Action Decade. These will be conveyed to the fourteenth session of the Arab Ministerial Water Council (AMWC) to inform Arab States preparations for the United Nations 2023 Water Conference.

Key messages

General messages

- Integrated water resources management (IWRM) is essential for alleviating impacts of worsening freshwater scarcity in the Arab region, including scarcity of groundwater and transboundary water resources. Notwithstanding notable progress in IWRM implementation between 2017 and 2020, to reach SDG target 6.5 by 2030, the region still needs to double implementation rate, with particular attention to financing, which has undergone the least progress.

- Though the region is ahead of global averages on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 targets on access to water and sanitation services, significant disparities between urban and rural areas persist and conflict and occupation pose serious difficulties.

- Almost all Arab countries largely depend for meeting their water needs on transboundary water resources. Yet, cooperative transboundary arrangements are lacking for a large subset of transboundary river basins and aquifers.

- In the water-scarce Arab region, adaptation to climate change is all about water. The region received 8.5 times more debt than grants and 3.5 times more support for mitigation than for adaptation; all without benefits reaching the most vulnerable. In addition, the six Arab LDCs (Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen) received just 5 per cent of overall commitments and 18 per cent of adaptation commitments (2013-2019).

- With an average water use efficiency (WUE) of $\$10/m^3$, the region lags behind the global average, estimated at $\$19/m^3$. With early adoption of the SDGs and formulation of indicator methodologies, efforts to improve WUE seem to have achieved some success. However, lack of data renders reliable assessment of progress difficult.

- To enhance water availability and productivity, there is throughout the region a great need for cross-sectoral cooperation.

Thematic priorities

1. *Integrated water resource management*

    - To advance IWRM and the related SDG indicator 6.5.1, the following are crucially needed: coherent governance and effective coordination within and across sectors; evidence-based decision-making and policy coherence for effective and transparent legislation; improved availability, access and sharing of data and information; leveraged innovation and technologies; enhanced master planning and management at basin level; closer transboundary cooperation; capacity development; stronger political will; multi-stakeholder engagement and a participatory

approach involving civil society, academia and research institutions, experts, and the private sector; and release of female and youth potential.

- Surface and groundwater resources management can be improved by groundwater basin regulation and management frameworks; abstraction rights; mechanisms for valuing and pricing groundwater; managed aquifer recharge; and storm water harvesting and utilization.

2. *Water for All*

- Water and sanitation services are human rights, not just a commodity. As such, they should be available to all, especially the poor and vulnerable, irrespective of ability to pay. Access of individuals to safe drinking water and sanitation services should be a priority, irrespective of allocations to other sectors, and water accounting and auditing could be used to support equitable water allocation.

- Access to water in conflict situations is gravely curtailed by direct attacks on water operators, looting and destruction of infrastructure, as well as by the indirect impact of loss of human resources due to emigration and displacement. The cumulative effect is a long-term and progressive decline in water and sanitation service delivery. Hence, to guard against de-development and decline of water services as a result of protracted conflicts, the need arises for bolstering resilience of water services to conflict-related and other hazards, both before and during crises. Moreover, international humanitarian law should be respected when ensuring water for all under conditions of conflict.

- The complexity and systemic nature of water services should be taken into consideration when addressing challenges faced by communities, water service providers and governments during protracted conflicts. Furthermore, in both anticipating and responding to protracted conflicts and other crises, humanitarian and development actors need to strengthen their partnerships.

- To improve service delivery, increased investment in both the technical and human resources capacities of water operators and water infrastructure is needed.

- Energy and its cost should be taken into account in water supply and wastewater services.

- Recommendations to the United Nations system and the international community:

    - The international community and humanitarian organizations should move quickly to relieve suffering of people in Arab countries whose water situation is critical as a result of war and conflict.

    - Development interventions need to be aligned with national priorities, with greater cooperation between humanitarian and development agencies to strengthen resilience of water services before and during protracted crises.

    - The United Nations and its relevant entities should support water-scarce countries in delivering the commitments of the 2030 Agenda towards safe, secure, resilient, ecologically sustainable, and inclusive access to water and sanitation. Countries within and/or bordering crisis zones facing water scarcity, and those hosting large numbers of refugees and displaced persons, should receive special support.

3. *Transboundary water cooperation*

- Challenges in transboundary water cooperation include lack of funding, lack of availability and exchange of data, especially on groundwater resources, and lack of technical and financial resources for data collection.

- The circle of participation should be widened, and win-win solutions and science-based policy formulations fostering water cooperation should be identified. Cooperation should, among other measures, include sharing data, monitoring, forecasting and warning, and capacity development.

- Mechanisms for cooperative and knowledge-based water management should be developed, and a governance structure for transboundary cooperation, involving legal, technical and financial mechanisms, should be established.

- There is an urgent need for establishing research centres for transboundary water resources to address data exchange and collection, feasibility studies for projects, and climate change impacts.

- Water negotiation and mediation capacity development programmes should be implemented, particularly in developing countries, in aid of preventing conflicts, building cooperation opportunities, and establishing regional stability and security through political dialogue and water diplomacy.

- The media can play a role in enhancing trust among parties and political will for transboundary water cooperation.

- Recommendations to the United Nations system and international community:

  The international community must do more to prevent human-induced water scarcity and displacement, not only within states, but also in transboundary contexts and in areas under occupation. Building resilience of afflicted communities requires states to cooperate in managing transboundary surface and groundwater resources, maintaining riparian ecosystems, and conducting impact assessments for projects with transboundary impacts.

4. *Water and climate change*

- Arab States are drawing increasingly on science to inform their policies and commitments on climate, for example, by using regional climate modelling provided through RICCAR to assess climate change at country/basin level. They are also seeking to provide a climate rationale for water-related climate policies and projects. However, implementation of science-based assessments should be further promoted to inform joint action on water and climate, and a common regional knowledge base, shared by the regional stakeholders and partners, should be established.

- Climate adaptation and mitigation should be mainstreamed across water and water-dependent sectors, like agriculture, and access to climate finance for adaptation should be increased.

- To reduce risks and save lives, joint actions to address climate and water issues are required. Close cooperation between authorities working on climate and those working on water could be promoted through, for example, joint reviews of planned or ongoing nationally determined contributions (NDC) and national adaptation plan (NAP) actions.

- Due to climate change, extreme events, such as droughts and floods, are becoming more frequent, requiring increased investments in strengthening resilience and enhancing potential for recovery.

5. *Water resource management and water use efficiency (WUE)*

- Coordinated cross-sectoral implementation of effective technical, financial and institutional solutions is needed to improve governance, increase WUE, raise water productivity, and enhance water sustainability. Examples of needed efforts include reducing non-revenue water, and boosting cost recovery and financial sustainability

- Support must be extended to develop capacity of water operators for enhancing operation of water resources and cost recovery.

- National-level capacities for enhanced monitoring of WUE across sectors should be improved. Guidelines for improvement of allocation of water resources at country level are needed for decision makers and water-resource planners.

- Cost recovery in government-run projects should be improved by engaging the private sector and local communities, within collaborative, clear and transparent frameworks.

- Efficiency of provision of water services needs to be improved; the exact economic value of water for different sectors should be determined, without prejudice to social and cultural values; and strategies need to be reviewed to enhance financial returns.

- A shift from "sustainability of supply" to "sustainability of consumption" is needed through adoption of structural socio-political and economic policy instruments that can be most effective in enhancing cost recovery.

- Water loss resulting from agricultural production and post-harvest and food waste should be calculated and reduced.

- Irrigated agriculture uses a major share of water, while producing a low economic output in the Arab Region, which negatively impacts WUE. Reflecting WUE in water reallocation regimes needs to take into consideration the local socioeconomic, environmental, and food-security context.

- Agricultural water management can be improved by raising irrigation efficiency and productivity through modern farming and irrigation systems, adopting smart farming systems, selecting drought and salt-tolerant crops, increasing research and development, integrating drylands curricula into academic programmes, providing farmers with appropriate training to adopt modern farming systems, and expanding participation of farmers in decision-making.

6. *Water across Sectors/Non-conventional water resources*

- Cross-sectoral partnerships, cooperation, technologies, and financing mechanisms, as well as institutional frameworks that link water and other relevant sectors, should be promoted.

- Water security should remain at the centre of the water-energy-food nexus, since food and energy security cannot be achieved and maintained without water security.

- Knowledge of benefits and opportunities of using treated wastewater, as well as the capacity for such use, should be enhanced, and industries should be strictly regulated to enforce treatment of wastewater before discharge into public systems or nature.

- Use of non-conventional water to enhance water availability is dependent upon both financial and environmental sustainability and energy cost and availability. Hence, a water-energy nexus lens

should be adopted when drawing upon renewable energy sources that could create green job opportunities, particularly for youth.

- Use of non-conventional water resources in water-scarce countries should be supported through appropriate technology transfer to, financing for, and capacity development of national and regional institutions and research centres.

- Public policies should include promotion of production and use of non-conventional water and linking such use to public health and food production.

- Municipal wastewater management should be improved by maximizing treated wastewater (TWW) reuse in appropriate sectors; developing required health risk management plans; incentivizing private-sector TWW reuse; promoting R&D in TWW reuse in various sectors; ensuring medical wastewater separation from municipal wastewater; and intensifying research on emerging pharmaceuticals in wastewater.

- Water-related ecosystems providing habitats for plants and animals are important for biodiversity. Data and environmental assessments are needed to monitor shrinking freshwater ecosystems, such as wetlands, and ensure sustainability of their services.

Accelerators

1. *Financing water*

- International concessional funding and public and private investments in the water sector are needed. Governments are encouraged to improve enabling environment regulatory frameworks and explore new approaches to encouragement of investment in environmentally sustainable water and sanitation-related infrastructure and services, while ensuring the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

- The water sector should be supported by enhanced access to innovative and blended financing. Examples include efforts of the Islamic Development Bank to work with philanthropic organizations and with the Green Climate Fund and opportunities afforded by the Climate/SDGs Debt Swap and Donor Nexus Initiative of ESCWA.

- Preparation of bankable water projects should be improved through, for example, reducing non-revenue losses, improving technical and financial efficiency, enhancing governance, and increasing transparency, while heeding the need for cost-recovery and ensuring inclusion of vulnerable groups.

- Operation and maintenance and efficiency of water utilities should be promoted to improve their credit worthiness.

- Private-sector engagement needs to be encouraged through improved data monitoring and reporting, enhanced certainty of cost recovery, and credit guarantees.

- Collaboration between bilateral donors and private banks should be encouraged in order to improve provision of grants/credits/human resources in support of delivery of water services.

- Funding should be directed to projects that better respond to country water priorities.

- Countries, particularly those in fragile or conflict situations, should be supported in accessing funding opportunities and ensuring financial sustainability of projects.

- Financing for water projects can be increased by twinning water objectives with other development objectives related to health, human rights, food security and climate resilience.

- Sustainable financing, regulation, monitoring, reporting, and maintenance mechanisms need to be incorporated into water-related project interventions.

- On climate finance for the water sector:

    - Efforts should be made to increase the number of accredited agencies in the region eligible for access to multilateral climate funds
    - More climate finance is needed for adaptation, specifically for adaptation related to water, which should be in the form of grants, not debts.
    - More funding should be directed towards smart technologies and non-conventional water resources.
    - Donors and global funds should be encouraged to reduce the time needed for project review and disbursement of funds. Onsite monitoring and oversight of projects, though beneficial, may, if too sophisticated or cumbersome, increase implementation cost.
    - Funding should be prioritized to the most vulnerable countries in the region; more specifically, to the areas that are most vulnerable to climate change.

2. *Data to inform decision-making, monitoring and implementation*

- To better inform decision-making, data availability, accessibility and sharing should be improved, especially in transboundary water settings. Collaboration across regions and countries can support greater sharing of and access to data.

- Establishing national and regional water data platforms is needed for informing water management.

- Use of new technologies, such as earth observation and big data, combined with improved data analysis, should be encouraged in water resources management, as should adoption of deep learning and Artificial Intelligence.

- Management information systems (MIS) and decision support systems (DSS) can be established at national, integrated, and comprehensive levels for water sector monitoring, modelling and decision-making support, while taking advantage of modern technologies in all aspects of hydro-informatics.

- Remote sensing should be used to support risk management, particularly disaster risk management, and in monitoring water-related ecosystems.

3. *Innovation*

- There is need to foster in the water sector an enabling environment for innovation, technology access, and private-sector engagement.

- Innovation is not limited to technology; it is also about knowledge.

- Water for Jobs: to encourage young entrepreneurs, funding of start-ups is needed.

- To reduce disaster risk, innovation in early warning centres and institutions should be encouraged.

- While requiring intensified R&D and linkages across sectors, innovation should also draw upon local solutions and indigenous knowledge. Moreover, opportunities exist in the desalination industry for localization to reduce costs.

- The private sector can help innovation, upscaling, and dissemination.

- Management of surface and groundwater resources can be improved by innovations in governance.

4. *Capacity development and regional knowledge networks*

- Regional cooperation and partnerships support achievement of the goals of the Decade. For resource mobilization, exploitation of the comparative advantages of the various partners increases synergy and is an effective means for mainstreaming water initiatives and interventions, as well as for enhancing efficiency and impact.

- Water education and knowledge should start at an early age, including training youth on groundwater.

- Capacity development programmes that provide start-ups with entrepreneurial, finance and marketing skills, as well as with technical training for water demand management and water saving technologies, should be implemented.

- Capacity development for water diplomacy should be implemented.

- To strengthen knowledge and innovation, professional training in various water-related areas is needed.

- Farmers should be trained on modern, efficient irrigation systems, for instance through establishing irrigation consultancy services.

Initiatives and commitments

Arab States presented initiatives for and commitments to achieving internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These countries are Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.