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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report

Fifteenth session of the Committee on Water Resources
Beirut, 19-20 June 2023

Summary

The Committee on Water Resources of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held its fifteenth session in Beirut on 19 and 20 June 2023. The Committee considered the items on its agenda, including integrated water resources management for improved water security in the Arab region and groundwater resources management. The Committee followed up on the implementation of recommendations issued at its fourteenth session, and on progress in implementing the activities set out in the ESCWA programme plan. Participants also discussed the proposed programme plan for 2024 in the field of water resources in the light of regional priorities for the period 2021–2025.

The present report provides a brief review of discussions on each agenda item and the resulting recommendations.

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Contents

Annexes

Introduction

1. The Committee on Water Resources of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held its fifteenth session in Beirut on 19 and 20 June 2023, pursuant to ESCWA resolution 205 (XVIII) of 25 May 1995 on the establishment of a Committee on Water Resources in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, which was adopted by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in resolution 1995/26 of 24 July 1995.

I. Recommendations by the Committee on Water Resources at its fifteenth session

2. At the close of its fifteenth session, the Committee on Water Resources issued the following recommendations, some addressed to member States and others to the ESCWA secretariat.

A. Recommendations to member States

3. The Committee on Water Resources made the following recommendations to ESCWA member States:

(a) Welcome progress in implementing the water-related activities of the ESCWA programme plan, and the recommendations made by the Committee at its fourteenth session;

(b) Present a progress report on the implementation of recommendations made to member States in preparation for the sixteenth session of the Committee;

(c) Actively participate in the activities of the project "Improved Water Security in Arab States" and the project "Climate Resilience through Regional Cooperation: Advancing the integrated management of natural resources for sustainable development" to improve groundwater management at the aquifer, national and transboundary levels, especially in changing climatic conditions;

(d) Share success stories and lessons learned from national efforts to support the Water Action Decade and accelerate the implementation of water-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as the implementation of commitments under the Water Action Agenda, with a view to including them in the tenth issue of the ESCWA Water Development Report;

(e) Support measures and interventions that promote water security to address increasing water scarcity in the region, including the development of fundable project packages in the water sector, while focusing on the impact of climate change on water-dependent sectors and water security;

(f) Identify priorities and challenges to make progress in the area of integrated water resources management (IWRM) at the transboundary, national and subnational levels, and share relevant experiences at the next Committee session;

(g) Develop mechanisms to increase the collection, classification and dissemination of data on water sector project financing, including the quantity, quality and frequency of data issued by international financial institutions, donors and national budgets; intensify participation in regional meetings and workshops on increasing financing for water sector projects; and encourage the participation of counterparts from ministries of finance, planning and water-related sectors in these events.

B. Recommendations to the ESCWA secretariat

4. The Committee on Water Resources made the following recommendations to the ESCWA secretariat:

(a) Continue providing technical support, including advisory services, studies, activities and training programmes, upon the official request of member States and within the available financial resources of the

secretariat, so as to overcome challenges to achieving water security, fulfil commitments made in the framework of the Water Action Agenda, and support member States in sharing their experiences;

(b) Support on-demand assessments and analyses, within the available resources of the secretariat, to improve the management of groundwater resources and prevent their depletion at the aquifer, national and transboundary levels; assist States in the use of tools, innovative governance and appropriate techniques for this purpose and in the coordinated use of ground, surface and non-traditional water; build the capacities of young specialists, support the exchange of experiences between member States and share relevant success stories;

(c) Support member States in mobilizing water and climate finance by strengthening cooperation with international and regional financial institutions, providing guidance on types of water sector financing data that may be useful for projects preparation, and building capacities for project development and implementation;

(d) Continue to coordinate the Arab Initiative for Mobilizing Climate Finance for Water in the framework of the Water Action Agenda, in cooperation with the League of Arab States, the Islamic Development Bank, the Green Climate Fund, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Government of Sweden, and invite donors and other institutions to cooperate with the initiative;

(e) Coordinate with the custodians of SDG target 6.5 indicators to develop two updated regional reports on progress made in achieving both indicators in the Arab region;

(f) Study the economics of water in the Arab region, particularly groundwater resources, to contribute to the sector's access to innovative finance, emphasizing the right to water and sanitation services within the available resources of the secretariat;

(g) Strengthen regional and intersectoral coordination on climate action and transboundary risks through the work of the ESCWA Committees on Energy and Water Resources, and through the support provided by the Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies;

(h) Support agreements on common Arab positions in global negotiations on climate change through capacity-building workshops; identify the region's water and energy priorities; exchange knowledge and experiences; and use these positions for further guidance;

(i) Strengthen national capacities on effectively integrating climate action and nationally determined contributions into national development policies and plans and in key sectors such as water and energy, by sharing knowledge and raising awareness on best practices and opportunities;

(j) Continue to coordinate with regional and international organizations working in the field of water to ensure complementarity of efforts and avoid duplication of activities.

II. Topics of discussion

A. Follow-up issues

Implementation of activities under the ESCWA programme plan and of recommendations made by the Committee on Water Resources at its fourteenth session to the ESCWA secretariat
(Agenda item 4)

5. With reference to document E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/3, the representative of the secretariat made a presentation in which he highlighted the main activities that had been implemented since the fourteenth session of the Committee, held virtually, on 29 and 30 September 2021. He discussed the progress made in the implementation of water-related projects under ESCWA subprogramme 1 on climate change and natural

resource sustainability, and the activities implemented pursuant to the recommendations made by the Committee on Water Resources at its fourteenth session.

6. The activities consisted of supporting member States in the implementation of global agreements, resolutions and initiatives, conducting studies, issuing publications and convening expert group meetings and capacity-building workshops. Key areas of work included accelerating action towards SDG 6, analysing groundwater data to promote water security in the Arab region, supporting member States in the management of transboundary water resources, promoting the water-energy-food nexus at the Arab regional level, supporting the generation of and access to regional climate analyses in the Arab region, advancing disaster risk reduction in the region, supporting climate finance mobilization and access, and strengthening the Arab regional capacity to make progress in implementing the Paris Agreement and achieving SDG 13. The representative of the secretariat shed light on the implementation of recommendations made by the Committee on Water Resources at its fourteenth session.

7. Participants stressed the importance of the growing impact of climate change in Arab countries, particularly on the water sector, given the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, such as heavy rains and floods, in countries including Algeria, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia, and the changes in the Nile Delta, which have led to a widening gap between water needs and available sources. Participants presented some of the measures taken to address these challenges by increasing the share of non-conventional water, such as using desalinated water in agriculture and industry, working to reduce the quantity of consumed water, and developing and applying the concepts of water economics.

8. The interventions made by representatives of member States highlighted the challenges related to the sustainability of water resources, in particular the continued degradation of groundwater resources in the Syrian Arab Republic, and the continued indiscriminate drilling and irrational pumping of wells in Tunisia, which was leading to the depletion of groundwater resources and preventing them from serving as reserves for future generations. Participants underlined that the challenges of groundwater management were not strictly technical but also related to groundwater governance. Country experiences have shown the inefficacy of traditional solutions, such as meters. As such, political will, innovative methods and trust building with stakeholders play the biggest roles in finding solutions to these problems.

9. Discussions focused on climate action as a priority, particularly in adapting to climate change through early warning, water harvesting and other non-traditional water management tools. The representative of Jordan emphasized the role of ESCWA in coordinating climate initiatives in the Arab region to facilitate the mobilization of financial resources from funds, and to focus on framing the contribution of young people and training them on modern technologies.

10. Representatives of some countries said that the water sector was being addressed more in global climate conferences, to assess the impact of climate change on water resources as well as its social and economic impact. The representative of Egypt stated that the launch of the Cairo Call for Action at Cairo Water Week 2022 contributed to the inclusion of water topics in the twenty-seventh Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 27), and that the outcome document included water issues for the first time. The representative of Tunisia expressed interest in the successful experience of transitioning from groundwater-depleting agricultural activity to other economic sectors. The representative of Yemen asked about the Climate Debt Swap Mechanism, while the representative of Kuwait inquired about the electronic platform dedicated to achieving water security in the Arab region. The representative of Oman highlighted the important role of decision support systems, particularly in groundwater management.

11. The representative of Jordan presented his country’s experience in detecting wells that were in violation of the rules, regulations or laws. He talked about the legal aspects of those efforts, such as establishing an environmental police force and referring offenders to justice, the technical aspects such as remote sensing and mathematical modelling, and the institutional aspects such as the use of smart meters. The representative of Tunisia pointed out that the use of renewable energy in pumping groundwater posed several challenges,

particularly with regard to informal wells. He added that those practices might lead to the depletion of groundwater and cause more harm than good. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic commended the representative of Tunisia's views, emphasizing the complete loss of a number of springs due to the use of renewable energy in his country. The representative of Oman raised the possibility of strengthening legislation, increasing fines, and investing in more comprehensive and effective monitoring systems when using renewable energy to pump water from wells. Participants concluded that regional action should be coordinated to produce focused and implementable activities to achieve the desired results.

12. In response, the representative of the secretariat underlined the leading role of ESCWA in analysing the impact of climate change on surface and groundwater resources and in assessing its implications on agricultural productivity with a view to advancing water security. He stressed the importance of coordination between ESCWA and the focal points in each of the Arab countries to upload data and information on national groundwater resources on the Arab Groundwater Knowledge Platform. ESCWA intends to launch this platform in the coming period to facilitate access to and exchange of information on groundwater among Arab countries, especially for researchers and academics working in related fields. With regard to financing, the representative of the secretariat briefed the participants on the Climate/SDGs Debt Swap and Donor Nexus Mechanism launched by ESCWA in support of member States, which aims to convert national debt payments on external debt into domestic investments to implement climate change adaptation projects through cooperative arrangements between debtors, creditors and donors.

13. The representative of the secretariat mentioned the possibility of coordinating a regional round-table discussion during which the experiences of countries around the world with expertise in sustainable groundwater management, such as the controlled pumping of water using renewable energy sources, would be presented. He stressed the need to focus on building the capacities of young people in using technology to improve water analysis processes in the light of climate change through programmes provided by the Arab Integrated Water Resources Management Network (AWARENET) and networks of young water specialists.

B. Water security in the Arab region

1. *Improved groundwater management through innovative knowledge tools* (Agenda item 5)

14. With reference to document E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/4, the representative of the secretariat made a presentation highlighting the importance of innovative knowledge tools and their role in improving groundwater management. She explained that those tools facilitated the collection, analysis and dissemination of data, information and knowledge, and helped in achieving a deeper understanding of groundwater systems with a view to reaching informed decisions on their use and management. The representative of the secretariat presented key techniques to be used in groundwater management, including on-site measurement techniques, remote sensing technology, geographic information systems, groundwater modelling, artificial intelligence and machine learning for analysing and processing large volumes of data. She presented the activities of ESCWA in this regard, namely the establishment of the Arab Groundwater Knowledge Platform, groundwater modelling to assess the impacts of climate change, the use of groundwater analysis tools in case studies of selected countries, and the updating of the hydrogeological map of the Arab region. ESCWA carried out these activities in coordination with a network of groundwater focal points designated by member States.

15. The representative of the secretariat highlighted two case studies. The first was carried out in partnership with the Palestinian Water Authority to assess the potential impact of climate change on the availability of groundwater resources in the Eocene aquifer in the West Bank, and concluded that precipitation and groundwater recharge would be significantly affected between 2041 and 2060. The second was conducted by ESCWA in collaboration with the Ministry of Water Resources in Iraq and the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Drylands (ACSAD) to assess the potential impact of climate change on the Dibdibba aquifer in Iraq. The results of this study showed the severity of the impact of climate change on groundwater resources in the Dibdibba aquifer, with possible consequences on the decline in groundwater reserves and the sharp

decline in its level. The representative of the secretariat concluded by noting that these findings required decision makers to take immediate action to mitigate the effects of potential changes in aquifer reserves and water level distribution.

16. Participants shared their views on the importance of networking between the public and academic sectors given that cutting-edge science, such as mathematical modelling and artificial intelligence, significantly improved knowledge about groundwater properties and contributed to its rational management. These techniques are particularly important amid the need to access deeper aquifers with the depletion of shallow aquifers. Participants also discussed increasing the efficiency of smart technological applications through the expansion of databases, and mentioned in this context the importance of involving local communities in the process of data and information collection. The difficulty of coordinating between sectors involved in water management in member States, particularly in the exchange of information, and the potential role of ESCWA in this area were also addressed. A proposal was put forward to hold an Arab summit on water issues at the regional level and ways to address them in a coordinated manner.

17. The representative of Yemen raised a few structural issues, such as not properly reflecting water issues in national development visions, indicating the need to provide training to decision makers on water-related topics. He talked about the pollution of aquifers as a result of the aquifer recharge with produced water into the aquifers to maintain the pressure required for oil extraction. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic mentioned other obstacles to the issuance of sentences in cases of water overuse amid the difficult conditions faced by farmers. The representative of Egypt explained that many countries were suffering from groundwater salinization, which had important implications on food security in the Nile Delta. The representative of the State of Palestine said that the same problem existed in the Jordan Valley, where date palms, which were the main source of livelihood for Palestinians, were grown.

18. The representative of Tunisia expressed his interest in constructing dams to exploit water available during periods of heavy rainfall, which was usually wasted as runoff, to recharge aquifers. He asked to learn about the experiences of countries that had built similar dams. The representative of Kuwait asked about the experience of Jordan in applying mathematical modelling in groundwater analysis and management.

19. In response, the representative of the secretariat mentioned a study undertaken by ESCWA, in cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), to assess the impact of sea-level rise on the Nile Delta and its cost on the transport, housing and agricultural sectors. He said that some organizations were currently developing a guide on the use of saline water in agriculture. He also discussed rain-fed agriculture and its importance in addressing the depletion of water resources, and highlighted the growing trend of conducting trainings on water modelling in different climate scenarios in the workplace in order to maximize their benefit. Additionally, the representative of the secretariat praised the experience of Jordan in treating wastewater and raising water use efficiency, and the pioneering experience of Oman in produced water treatment, which was presented in previous workshops organized by ESCWA on the water-energy nexus.

20. With regard to the hydrological map, the representative of the secretariat explained that focal points in each country had been contacted to complete the development and launch of the dedicated platform. He confirmed the responsiveness of ESCWA to climate modelling requests received from member States.

2. *Midterm comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade in the Arab region* (Agenda item 6)

21. With reference to document E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/5, the representative of the ESCWA secretariat made a presentation on the International Decade for Action: Water for Sustainable Development 2018–2028, commonly referred to as the Water Action Decade, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2016 to focus on the water-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Within this framework, the United Nations 2023 Water Conference was held in New York from

22 to 24 March 2023, and a report on progress in the implementation of the goals of the Decade will be issued. The representative of the secretariat said that ESCWA had hosted the first regional meeting (Beirut, 28–29 March 2018) to consolidate regional views and priorities on water-related issues in the Arab region. In response to its regional mandate, ESCWA also established a multi-stakeholder regional inter-agency consultative group. The group had convened several regional meetings and events that have contributed to increasing understanding and support for the Water Action Decade.

22. The representative of the secretariat referred to the Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade, held by ESCWA in Beirut on 18 and 19 May 2022 to assess regional progress in achieving the objectives of the Decade, discuss related challenges and opportunities, and address ways to accelerate the achievement of these objectives. He presented the outcomes of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference, during which representatives of Member States and organizations were invited to express their voluntary commitments to the Water Action Decade. The side event for the Arab region, organized on 24 March 2023, resulted in the launch of the Arab Initiative for Mobilizing Climate Finance for Water, in partnership with ESCWA, the League of Arab States, the Islamic Development Bank and the Green Climate Fund. The initiative was a commitment under the Water Action Agenda to secure greater financing for climate action in the water and water-dependent sectors in Arab countries. This includes issuing a brief on financing climate action in the water sector, and organizing a regional forum on financing climate action in the water sector for Arab countries in 2023.

23. The representative of the secretariat noted that those efforts would be complemented by trainings for Arab countries and technical support in the field of water and adaptation to assist in the preparation of bankable water projects related to climate finance.

3. *Water sector finance*
(Agenda item 7)

24. With reference to document E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/6, the representatives of the secretariat made a presentation on the key sources of financing for the water sector, including national budgets, regional and international funds (and climate action funds), and private sector investment. The presentation highlighted the work of ESCWA in facilitating access to innovative financing instruments, such as Special Drawing Rights (SDR) from the International Monetary Fund. The representatives of the secretariat also mentioned that ESCWA organized a conference on "Special Drawing Rights and Beyond: The Future of Development Finance, Fiscal Spending and Inequality in the Arab Region", to expand the use of SDRs by member States and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs, including SDG 6. They presented the ESCWA Climate/SDGs Debt Swap and Donor Nexus Initiative in the Arab region, and the global experiences that succeeded in mobilizing investment for projects aimed at increasing water use efficiency.

25. The representatives of the secretariat also noted that many regional funds were financing the water sector, and that there was a general trend to increase the participation of international climate finance funds and private investments. In this context, the Arab Initiative for Mobilizing Climate Finance for Water, recently launched by ESCWA in partnership with the League of Arab States, the Islamic Development Bank and the Green Climate Fund, was an example of the available opportunities for public-private cooperation to facilitate access to finance in the water sector, which was hampered by the absence of data on water resource assessments and uses.

26. Representatives of member States highlighted the challenges related to the cost recovery of water supply services. They discussed how to find a balance between the priorities of the Ministry of Finance, which focus on financial efficiency, and the priorities of the Ministry of Water, which are aimed at delivering sufficient quantities of water to all. They also discussed proposed ways to improve low-cost recovery levels without resorting to commodification, including the redistribution of cost to the most consuming segments of the population.

27. The representative of Tunisia said that his country was setting several tariff tranches, including a social tariff to ensure that the poor had access to water, while incrementally increasing water tariffs to reflect the increase in quantities consumed. The representative of the State of Palestine considered that the lack of control over water resources was the biggest obstacle to cost recovery in her country, in addition to the fact that most of the funding comes from abroad, which increases the State's dependence on creditor countries in the light of changing priorities amid the volatility of the global situation. The representative of Morocco pointed out that alternative water resource development projects, such as desalination and recycling, implemented within the framework of public-private partnership schemes, contributed to the efficiency of the cost recovery of water production. The representative of Egypt said that the water sector was not an investment-attracting sector, which required the State to bear the costs of maintenance and treatment, and acknowledged that the agricultural sector represented the largest burden on the State treasury. He added that there were attempts to find solutions, such as establishing holding companies aimed at financing their services with cost recovery to contribute to the sustainability of the sector. The representative of Tunisia said that some States incurred high costs to desalinate large quantities of water to potable levels, most of which were consumed for domestic use, and only the smallest part was devoted to drinking. Therefore, some countries resorted to other solutions, such as desalinating limited quantities of seawater and mixing desalinated water with seawater. One proposed solution was to separate drinking water networks from domestic use networks.

28. In response, the representative of the secretariat highlighted the need to improve data quality to attract more investors in the water sector. She stressed the importance of cost recovery as well as the establishment of water markets with effective exchange of information. She also underlined the need to deliver a clear message to international climate change forums on the efforts of Arab countries to sustainably manage national water resources while working to provide water to citizens, especially the most vulnerable groups, and the burden of the water sector on the public budget, in light of the widespread belief that Arab countries encouraged wasteful water consumption patterns as a result of the applied subsidy systems.

4. *Round-table discussion: progress towards water-related Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region*
(Agenda item 8)

29. With reference to document E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/7, the representative of the secretariat showcased the level of progress made in the implementation of SDG 6 targets, namely target 6.1 on supplying safe drinking water, target 6.2 on monitoring progress in the access to adequate sanitation services, target 6.3 on the level of wastewater treatment and reuse, indicator 6.4.2 which measures the extent of water stress, and other indicators. The representative of the secretariat highlighted the regional reports prepared by ESCWA, and requested State representatives to provide data and case studies highlighting the efforts of States in moving towards the implementation of indicator 6.5.1, especially those that could not be included in the questionnaires distributed to monitor this target. The representative of the secretariat highlighted the support of ESCWA to member States in terms of cooperation in transboundary water management, which was monitored by indicator 6.5.2, and reported that ESCWA had issued two reports for the Arab region that included a regional analysis of the results of the first and second monitoring cycles. The monitoring results showed that implementation rates increased in the Arab region from 19 to 30 per cent, in conjunction with the increase in the number of countries reporting on this target from 10 to 15, during the period from the first monitoring cycle (2017) to the second monitoring cycle (2020). The ESCWA representative invited participants to discuss analyses that not only included water indicators but also addressed their impact on health, food security, climate change, the economy and finance. He also highlighted the lack of water-related data in many countries, and the need to improve its availability to paint a clearer picture of the progress made in achieving the water-related SDGs in the Arab region.

30. The representative of Tunisia presented the national water sector policy, emphasizing its alignment with the SDGs. In the framework of monitoring progress in the implementation of water-related indicators, the representative of Tunisia indicated an increase in the rate of drinking water supply (indicator 6.5.1) from 97.5 to 98.4 per cent in the period from 2015 to 2021. Connections to basic sanitation services (indicator 6.5.2)

reached 76.6 per cent in the areas of intervention of the National Sanitation Office, and wastewater treatment rates (indicator 6.5.3) were up to 70 per cent nationwide. Water use efficiency (indicator 6.4.1) stood at $\$7.9/m^3$. The level of water stress (indicator 6.4.2) continued to rise until it reached 119 per cent in 2021. The integrated water resources management implementation score (indicator 6.5.1) was calculated at 60 per cent in 2020.

31. The representative of Jordan made a presentation in which he discussed the most important developments in the progress towards achieving the SDGs. He mentioned that a division on sustainable development was established, and a study was prepared to institutionalize the work with the aim of reducing the loss and degradation of water resources. The presentation outlined actions to achieve the SDGs and related targets, emphasizing the interlinkage between SDG 6 and SDG 2 to end hunger by improving irrigation water use and delivery efficiency; and the interlinkage with SDG 13 on climate change, which puts pressure on the availability of water resources, weakening in turn the ability to adapt to the effects of climate change. The discussion addressed the lack of resources available for water data collection and the integration of the achievement of water-related SDGs into national development plans.

32. The representative of Kuwait explained that the Supreme Council for Planning was responsible for monitoring progress in the implementation of the SDGs, while the Ministry of Water and Energy was responsible for working towards SDG 6. The representative of Kuwait stated that the most significant national challenge facing the water sector was the steady rise in water withdrawal levels to match production rates, and highlighted the challenges generated by high levels of consumption on national water management systems. Kuwait was addressing these challenges by reusing wastewater on a larger scale, using treated water in ornamental agriculture, resorting to desalination, using advanced technologies, especially in the agricultural sector, reducing losses in water supply networks, and encouraging investors to develop water sources to reduce the financial burden on the State. The representative of Kuwait said that the plan to meet water needs was in line with national priorities and proportionate with progress in the implementation of the SDGs.

33. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic explained that the Government continued to provide 30 to 80 per cent drinking water to households (target 6.1) despite the difficult conditions facing the country. He said that the amount of saved water was insufficient because of worn-out equipment, and that the levels of connection to sewage systems remained low at only 11 per cent in remote rural areas. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic said that there were still challenges to achieving indicator 6.5.2 related to transboundary water management, and that the solution consisted mainly of strengthening relations with neighbouring countries. He explained that strengthening his country's relationship with Iraq had resulted in an agreement on joint technical cooperation between the two countries for the management of the Euphrates water, with the establishment of an international committee between the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq to coordinate project implementation in the framework of joint water management. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic addressed the challenges of maintaining ecological balance and implementing target 6.6, particularly in mountainous areas that were home to springs, and in water bodies. The main obstacle to rationalizing water consumption and achieving progress in the implementation of target 6.4 was the uncontrolled drilling of wells and the excessive withdrawal of water despite the presence of meters on most wells, as human and material resources prevented comprehensive and regular monitoring of well drilling and water withdrawal.

34. The representative of Morocco presented the geographical distribution of groundwater resources in Morocco. He said that there was a significant decline in the level of groundwater resources as more than 80 per cent of wells were unlicensed, which had led to the depletion of more than one billion cubic metres of non-renewable groundwater reserves in conjunction with a record water level drop. To address the deterioration in the water sector, Morocco developed and implemented a water policy by constructing large dams, seawater desalination plants and wastewater treatment plants. These installations provided the support needed to meet drinking water and irrigation needs, produce hydropower, provide protection from floods, improve water quality, and keep pace with economic and social development. With regard to the implementation of the SDGs, access to drinking water services (indicator 6.5.1) (100 per cent in urban areas and 98.4 per cent in rural areas)

and sanitation services (indicator 6.5.2) (96 per cent in urban areas and 85.4 per cent in rural areas) was largely available. In terms of improving wastewater reuse (target 6.3), 24 million m^3 of treated wastewater was currently being reused for irrigation of green spaces with a target to reach 100 million m^3 by 2030. Work was underway to secure 1,300 million m^3 per year of desalinated seawater by 2030 for domestic, industrial, tourism and irrigation use. Efforts were targeting the increase of water use efficiency in all sectors (target 6.4) by improving the profitability of water distribution networks, which currently stands at 76 per cent, to 80 per cent by 2030, and by increasing agricultural areas irrigated with water-saving techniques from the current 710,000 hectares to one million hectares by 2030. In order to preserve water-related ecosystems, work was underway to divert the surplus water of the Sebou basin to the Bou Regreg and Oum Er-Rbia basins by an average of 800 million m^3 per year, as well as to allocate quantities of water to preserve the Berrechid and Saïss aquifers.

35. The representative of Egypt explained that working towards water-related SDGs had succeeded in increasing the proportion of the population using safe drinking water from 90 to 98.7 per cent from 2015 to 2023, and safe sanitation services from 50 to 66.7 per cent during the same period. Water use efficiency increased from 2.52 to 4.81 per cent between 2017 and 2021. IWRM implementation rates improved from 40 to 63 per cent during the same period. Water stress continues to rise, recording an increase of 3.76 per cent in 2021. The representative of Egypt also presented his country's water resource development strategy until 2050, explaining that it aimed at achieving water security in Egypt through the sustainable management of water resources based on four main axes: development of conventional and non-conventional water resources; rationalization of water uses by optimizing the use of limited resources; improving water quality; and creating an appropriate IWRM environment.

36. The representative of Oman presented the progress made in achieving the water-related SDGs. The indicator of access to safe and improved water sources was more than 97 per cent in urban areas and 88 per cent in rural areas. Access to improved sanitation facilities reached 97 per cent in urban and rural areas. To improve wastewater reuse and prevent the pollution of ecosystems, produced water was treated and reused as a means to increase the amount of water available. In the framework of water resource mobilization, desalination technologies have been adopted and dams have been built for groundwater recharge and surface storage, increasing water production from about 200 million m^3 in 2011 to about 475 million m^3 in 2021. Oman had also resorted to cloud seeding, which had increased rainfall over the past years from about 15 to 18 per cent. In the same context, Oman had also worked on developing the comprehensive national water strategy in parallel with the Oman Vision 2040, aimed at optimizing the use of natural resources while developing non-conventional water sources to achieve water and food security.

37. The representative of the State of Palestine presented the structure of the Palestinian National Framework for Sustainable Development 2030 and the progress made in achieving the SDGs. Water projects such as the construction of main reservoirs, water transmission lines and desalination plants have contributed to remarkable progress that led to an increase in the percentage of households connected to water networks to 94.5 per cent at the beginning of 2022. With regard to water quality, a water safety and security programme was being developed. The representative of the State of Palestine noted the significant disparity between the percentage of households connected to the public sanitation network in the West Bank (34 per cent) and in the Gaza Strip (81 per cent) in 2020. She also stated that the percentage of treated water within the Palestinian territories increased from 12 to 18 per cent between 2019 and 2022. However, treated water reused in irrigation did not exceed 5 per cent. The State of Palestine was working to raise the efficiency of water use through groundwater withdrawal monitoring programmes, and to develop licensing and tariff systems and other activities to regulate water use. With regard to cooperation in the management of transboundary water basins, there was no joint transboundary water management agreement, and the text of article 40 of the Oslo Accord and the Joint Committee can in no way be considered a joint mechanism for the management of transboundary waters. The representative of the State of Palestine added that funding was largely based on external sources of financing, particularly infrastructure projects, because the Government's contribution capacity was very limited. The presentation by the representative of the State of Palestine highlighted the initiatives undertaken by the Government to enhance the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.

38. The representative of Algeria said that his country had developed the national water strategy in response to the challenges resulting from water stress and in the framework of sustainable water resources development. The strategy included sustainably mobilizing, developing and preserving water resources, supporting economic, agricultural and industrial renewal, and establishing a modern and effective water management model. Activities carried out to implement the strategy were linked to the achievement of the SDGs. In this framework, dams had been constructed and connected to divert water to the areas that are most in need (target 6.1), and seawater desalination plants had been established, providing an average daily supply per capita of 180 litres. In the context of improving the rational use of water resources (target 6.4), new water-saving techniques had been adopted in agriculture, such as drip irrigation, sprinkler irrigation and the reuse of treated wastewater for agricultural purposes. With regard to drinking water supply, emphasis had been placed on significantly reducing unbilled water, and efforts to mobilize water resources had been made in parallel with awareness and incentive programmes to rationalize water consumption. Within the framework of integrated water resources management, including transboundary cooperation, five basins had been identified, each with its own hydrographic basin agency and commission (indicator 6.5.2). Water plans, such as the National Water Plan, Water Resources Development Guidelines and the National Sanitation Development Plan, had been developed in support of action towards achieving the water-related SDGs. The representative of Algeria also presented the future prospects of the National Water Strategy, which focused on mobilizing conventional water, making seawater desalination the main source of supply of drinking water to coastal cities, accelerating the development of treated wastewater reuse, and reforming the legal, institutional and regulatory framework accompanying these improvements.

39. Representatives of member States stressed the need to receive support from ESCWA and to transition from the problem identification phase to the solution finding phase, especially in the light of major challenges facing the water sector in Arab countries, which exceeded available capacity to overcome them. Inquiries were raised with regard to approaches used to calculate and improve water productivity in conveyance and distribution networks from countries that had succeeded in advancing in WUE indicators. He asked countries that had succeeded in achieving progress in water use efficiency indicators how to. The answer highlighted that the focus of efforts to improve indicators was on reducing losses in supply networks. The representative of the State of Palestine pointed out the difficulty of monitoring indicators in areas under the control of the occupation, as the monitoring and follow-up process was mainly hampered by the difficulty of accessing the wells that were remotely managed by the occupying power.

40. The representative of Oman proposed the establishment of an Arab working group, with the assistance and coordination of ESCWA, to support member States in the achievement of sustainable development indicators, namely by clarifying calculation methods and providing a platform for exchanging experiences among member States. Representatives of some of the countries that have made significant progress in the implementation of water-related sustainable development indicators explained the methods adopted to develop water resources, in particular the construction of major desalination plants to increase the quantities of water produced. With regard to transboundary water basins, the important role of applying mathematical equations to modelling transboundary water flows was highlighted. The experiences of some States in joint action on transboundary water management and development were presented. The importance of communication and exchange between countries was highlighted, since the nature of challenges facing the joint management of shared water resources was not limited to technical aspects but also included considerations related to trust building and political will. The representative of Kuwait, in her capacity as the representative of the State chairing the current session of the Committee on Water Resources, requested the contribution of ESCWA to the development of an implementation plan and clear criteria to consolidate the methods and equations for calculating indicators throughout the Arab region.

41. In response, the representative of the secretariat explained the roles of the custodian agencies for each SDG 6 indicator, which included clarification of concept definition accompanied by the development of clear frameworks and approaches for calculating indicators according to a globally consolidated methodology, with the possibility of adaptation to the national country context. He explained that the United Nations Environment Programme was the custodian agency for indicator 6.5.1, while the United Nations Economic Commission for

Europe and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) were the custodian agencies for indicator 6.5.2. Custodian agencies provided trainings on the Goal related to integrated water resources management, with the support of the Arab Integrated Water Resources Management Network (AWARENET). The representative of the secretariat referred to the contribution of ESCWA to the analysis of the challenges related to the implementation of indicators 6.5.1 and 6.5.2 at the level of the Arab region and possible ways to address them, by preparing regional reports on the progress achieved in implementing both indicators, in collaboration with the custodian agencies. The representative of the secretariat confirmed that ESCWA was ready to support countries in this area, by building bridges to exchange experiences, providing analytical tools that can be accessed from the designated electronic platforms, and publishing abstract studies, the results of Arab experiences and scientific analyses such as the assessment of the impact of climate on water resources.

42. The representative of the secretariat also explained that implementation rates of indicators 6.5.1 and 6.5.2 were similar to global ratios, but were still insufficient. As such, efforts should be intensified to achieve the desired goals by 2023. The representative of the secretariat encouraged member States to provide adequate information on the implementation of indicator 6.5.1, while including as much information as possible on relevant challenges and country specificities in the subjective questions section. He presented, for example, the case of the State of Palestine, whose implementation rates for indicator 6.5.1 were not included in the calculation of the global index. Nevertheless, it was included in the Arab Region Survey, and the resulting information was included in the regional report on the implementation of integrated water resources management in the Arab region. The representative of the secretariat thanked the representatives of member States for the increased number of States that had provided information on indicator 6.5.2, which had increased from 10 to 15 countries, noting the enhancement in the quality of information provided. He stressed the need for greater participation by a larger number of States.

C. Programmatic issues

1. *Proposed programme plan for 2024 in the field of water resources in the light of regional priorities for the period 2021-2025*
(Agenda item 9)

43. With reference to document E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/8, the representative of the secretariat introduced the proposed programme plan for 2024 in the field of water resources in the light of regional priorities for the period 2021–2025 discussed by the Committee on Water Resources at its fourteenth session. He provided an overview of the challenges that the region was facing in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs related to water and water security, and highlighted priorities for action to advance water security in the Arab region. He said that the proposed 2024 programme plan to improve water security amid climate change conditions in the Arab region consisted of working with multiple stakeholders to develop sustainable solutions for the water sector, collaborating on the management of shared basins, continuing to benefit from innovations in water technology, facilitating access to modern knowledge through regional knowledge centres, and supporting intergovernmental platforms and processes for the integration and coherence of water policies in related sectors, especially the agriculture sector. He stressed the need to continue scientific assessments to guide adaptation to the impact of climate change in the water sector, while mobilizing the necessary financial resources and involving the local community.

44. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic emphasized the need to frame young people’s energy to benefit from its enormous potential, especially in modern technological applications available for hydroanalysis. In turn, the representative of Jordan highlighted the need to identify priority areas of focus, which included filling the gap between supply and demand resulting from uneven spatial and temporal distribution of water resources received, which could be addressed through several approaches, including water harvesting. Those priorities also included the limited participation of the private sector in financing the water sector and the need to enhance the role of women in this area.

45. The representative of Yemen suggested that the request for ESCWA support should be in line with the available financial and technical resources, highlighting the need to resort to smart management based on modern technology to mitigate human error. He added that mathematical modelling facilitated the provision of information, and was important in countries where data monitoring was difficult, especially those located in conflict zones. It also facilitated access by end users, such as farmers, to important information to inform important development decisions.

46. The representative of Oman said that low-cost water harvesting, available through simple technological applications, played a major role in increasing the financial profitability of water resources, especially when collected water, which was often wasted as runoff, was pumped into aquifers. The representative of Oman also stressed the need to eliminate traditional irrigation methods in order to increase the financial productivity of water.

47. The representative of the State of Palestine highlighted the necessity of capacity-building, especially in applying mathematical equations, and the need to find mechanisms to encourage the private sector to invest in the water sector, despite the limited returns which represented the biggest obstacle to investment therein. Early reporting systems based on climate projections were also needed to reduce the impact of disasters. The representative of the State of Palestine noted that interest in nature-based solutions was increasing globally owing to their potential contribution to addressing the challenges in the water sector. Therefore, the possibility of including nature-based approaches in finding potential solutions for water resources management under increasing climate change impacts should be studied.

48. The representative of Egypt stressed the importance of focusing on the agriculture sector as the largest consumer of water, and the need to communicate information on water to farmers through modern applications and technology. He also emphasized the need to expand the scope of work on the development of water resources to include desalination and the treatment and reuse of polluted water in the national water agenda. The representative of Egypt said that including water issues in climate change mitigation plans instead of only limiting them to adaptation plans, increased the chances of mobilizing financial resources to work on water issues.

49. The representative of Kuwait encouraged ESCWA to support countries that lacked sufficient experience in the application of water harvesting due to the importance of this technique. The representative of Morocco, in turn, focused on prioritizing water security across the Arab region, and the potential of applying innovative technology to address this priority. He expressed his readiness to share accumulated experiences of his country in the field of water harvesting and its use in the recharge of aquifers. The representative of Algeria highlighted the close and direct relationship between water economics and climate finance, and explained that most of the funding for water projects came from government sources. She stressed the need to secure grants for advancing the implementation of integrated water management.

50. In response, the representative of the secretariat welcomed participants' feedback and suggestions on regional priorities. He said that ESCWA was working on the identified priorities and that it was ready to continue supporting States in this area. With regard to integrating the potential of the young people, he said that regional networks supported by ESCWA, which comprised young water experts, were presented, including the Arab Integrated Water Resources Management Network and the African Young Water Professionals Forum. ESCWA will consider ways to increase the participation of young people in water action.

51. In the context of water modelling, the representative of the secretariat mentioned the possibility of building on the efforts of ESCWA in developing climate models to predict the impact of climate change on water resources and its social and economic repercussions, and on the training that ESCWA had already provided or was currently providing to experts on using these models. The representative of the secretariat said that ESCWA was making strenuous efforts to integrate rainfall harvesting techniques into climate change adaptation packages developed in specific Arab countries. He commended the efforts of ESCWA to study ways to integrate nature-based solutions, continue to support countries in improving water use in the agricultural sector, work on water economics, and involve the private sector in financing the water sector.

Additionally, the representative of the secretariat mentioned the technical assistance programme, which consisted of operational activities provided at the request of member States, including policy advice, technical support, capacity-building and training, knowledge sharing and broader pilot field projects.

52. At the end of the discussion, participants agreed that the proposed 2024 programme plan would focus on proposed actions to improve water security amid climate change in the Arab region, in the light of regional priorities for the period 2021–2025.

2. *Joint meeting of the Committee on Water Resources and the Committee on Energy on the theme "Advancing the climate change agenda in the water and energy sectors"*

53. With reference to document E/ESCWA/C.3/2023/CRP.1-E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/CRP.1, and within the framework of the fourteenth session of the Committee on Energy and the fifteenth session of the Committee on Water Resources of ESCWA, the two committees held a joint meeting on the afternoon of Tuesday, 20 June 2023, on "Advancing the climate change agenda in the water and energy sectors". The representative of the secretariat made a presentation which included an overview of the main areas of work of ESCWA to support member States in strengthening their resilience to climate change through adaptation and mitigation processes, under the umbrella of the Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies, and with a focus on climate action in the water and energy sectors. He stressed the importance of mainstreaming climate considerations across sectors, and the necessity of using scientific assessments to guide water and energy policies. He also discussed climate finance, stating that ESCWA and its partners sought to bridge gaps in financing climate action by increasing knowledge and building the capacity of member States. He reviewed the main outcomes of the climate negotiations held at the twenty-seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and set out recommendations to strengthen efforts to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change, especially in view of preparations for two major events in the region, namely the second Middle East and North Africa Climate Week in Saudi Arabia in October 2023, and the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to UNFCCC in Dubai in November/December 2023.

54. The joint meeting facilitated in-depth deliberations on the water-energy nexus and how it was affected by climate change in the region. Participants stressed the importance of scientific research in formulating evidence-based policies. They commended ESCWA-led efforts to advance regional climate change projections, basin-level assessments, and climate change vulnerability analyses. They noted the effects of extreme weather events and rising sea levels on exacerbating challenges facing the water and energy sectors in the region. They also expressed their concern about the effects of sand and dust storms in many Arab countries, and the need to build capacity to tackle their effects, praising ESCWA efforts to strengthen cognitive and technical capacities through the Arab Climate Outlook Forum that was attended by Arab meteorological agencies. They highlighted the importance of technology transfer to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change in the water and energy sectors, and the need to localize technological solutions. They also stressed the need to adapt to climate change in the energy sector, not just mitigate its effects, given that extreme climate events negatively affected energy infrastructure. They also indicated the need for accredited national and subnational entities to facilitate access to and mobilize climate finance for the implementation of adaptation and mitigation projects financed by the Green Climate Fund and other financial mechanisms.

3. *Date and venue of the sixteenth session of the Committee on Water Resources* (Agenda item 10)

55. The Committee on Water Resources will hold its sixteenth session at the United Nations House in Beirut in 2025. The ESCWA secretariat will communicate with stakeholders to determine a specific date.

4. *Other matters*
(Agenda item 11)

56. No issues were raised under this item.

5. *Recommendations made by the Committee on Water Resources at its fifteenth session*
(Agenda item 12)

57. At its closing session, the Committee adopted the recommendations made at its fifteenth session as set out in the present report.

III. Organization of the session

A. Date and venue

58. The Committee on Water Resources held its fifteenth session in Beirut on 19 and 20 June 2023.

B. Opening

59. The representative of the State of Palestine, in her capacity as the representative of the country that chaired the fourteenth session of the Committee, opened the session. She welcomed the participants and thanked ESCWA for its determined efforts in supporting member States in water resources management development and for its hard work in organizing the session. She added that Committee members had participated over the previous two years in the implementation of activities related to groundwater analysis, integrated water resources management to accelerate action towards achieving SDG 6, and the strengthening of the water-energy-food nexus approach. The representative concluded her statement by thanking all Committee members and ESCWA for their support during her chairmanship of the fourteenth session of the Committee on Water Resources. She wished the representative of Kuwait the best of luck in chairing the fifteenth session.

60. The leader of the Climate Change and Natural Resource Sustainability Cluster gave a statement on behalf of the ESCWA secretariat. After welcoming the participants, she highlighted the focus areas of the discussion, which were centred around the regional water priorities for the period 2021–2025 identified during the fourteenth session of the Committee. She provided a brief overview of high-profile events in the water sector that had taken place since the previous Committee meeting in September 2021, in which ESCWA supported the participation of member States. She mentioned the events that were held during the climate conference such as Water Day and the Water Pavilion, in addition to the first Middle East and North Africa Climate Week hosted by the United Arab Emirates, the Groundwater Summit, Cairo Water Week, the Baghdad International Water Conference, the Gulf Water Conference, as well as the meetings of various expert groups, workshops and knowledge platforms that fostered exchange on ESCWA regional and country support to member States. The leader of the Climate Change and Natural Resource Sustainability Cluster at ESCWA stressed the need to include Arab priorities, such as groundwater management and transboundary cooperation, in the draft texts that were being discussed in global forums and platforms, given their importance in decision-making on means of implementation, namely access to technology, capacity-building and financing for Arab countries. She encouraged the representatives of countries to provide ESCWA with inputs and success stories of their national experiences in water resources management, to be included in the tenth biennial ESCWA report on water development, which shows how Arab countries have accelerated the implementation of water-related goals. She also mentioned the joint meeting of the Committee on Water Resources and the Committee on Energy, which will focus on advancing the climate change agenda in the water and energy sectors and provide an opportunity for cross-sectoral exchange.

C. Attendance

61. The session was attended by representatives from 14 ESCWA member States. Annex I to the present report sets out the list of participants.

D. Election of officers

62. Rule 18 of the ESCWA Rules of Procedure states: "Member States shall chair the sessions of the subsidiary bodies of the Commission on a rotating basis, in the Arabic alphabetical order employed by the United Nations." Accordingly, Kuwait chaired the fifteenth session of the Committee on Water Resources. The representatives of Egypt and the State of Palestine assumed the positions of first and second vice-chair, and the representative of Morocco that of rapporteur.

E. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work

63. At its first meeting, the Committee on Water Resources adopted the agenda and organization of work as set out in documents E/ESCWA/C.4/2019/L.1 and E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/L.2, respectively.

Annex I

List of participants

Algeria

Mr. Nasreddine Bou Jamlin
Central Director
Directorate of Water Security and Water Resources Mobilization
Ministry of Water Resources

Djibouti

Mr. Ibrahim Moussa Mighil
Technical Advisor
Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture

Mr. Ibrahim bin Mohammed Sultan
Director General of the General Department of Capacity-Building and Partnerships
Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture

Egypt

Mr. Walid Hakiki
Head of Sector
Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation

Jordan

Mr. Jihad Al-Mahamid
Secretary-General
Ministry of Water and Irrigation

Kuwait

Ms. Maha Hussein Al-Asousi
Acting Undersecretary of the Ministry
Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy

Ms. Sarah Al-Mutairi
Director of the Department of Chemical Work
Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy

Mauritania

Mr. Mohammed Abdalla Ali
Director of Department
Head of mission at the Office of the Minister of Water and Sanitation
Focal Point of the Committee on Water Resources
Ministry of Water and Sanitation

Morocco

Mr. Sulaiman Kaichouh
Head of the Department of Drinking Water Supply, Sanitation and Rainwater Valuation
General Directorate of Water Engineering
Ministry of Equipment and Water

Oman

Mr. Ahmad bin Mohammed Al Saidi
Ambassador of Oman in Lebanon

Mr. Abdulaziz bin Ali Al Mashikhi
Director-General of Water Management
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources

State of Palestine

Ms. Majeda Alawneh
Director-General
General Directorate of Water Sources and Water Control
Palestinian Water Authority

Saudi Arabia (online)

Mr. Ahmad bin Ali Al Ghamdi
Director General of the General Administration of Water Resources

Sudan

Ms. Sarah Idris Hassan Ahmed
Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Sudan in Lebanon

Syrian Arab Republic

Mr. Jihad Kanaan
International Water Director
Ministry of Water Resources

Tunisia

Mr. Reza Shahidiya
Minister Plenipotentiary
Tunisian Embassy in Lebanon

Tunisia (*continued*)

Mr. Reza Gabouj
Secretary of State to the Minister of Agriculture, in charge of water resources
Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries

Yemen

Mr. Nasser Mohammed Al-Yazidi
Advisor to the Minister of Water Resources, Policies and Programmes
ESCWA National Focal Point
Ministry of Water and Environment

Annex II

List of documents

Title	Item	Symbol
Information note		E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/INF.1
Provisional agenda and annotations	3	E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/L.1
Organization of work	3	E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/L.2
Implementation of activities under the ESCWA programme plan and of recommendations made by the Committee on Water Resources at its fourteenth session to the ESCWA secretariat	4	E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/3
Improved groundwater management through innovative knowledge tools	5	E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/4
Midterm comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade in the Arab region	6	E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/5
Water sector finance	7	E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/6
Round-table discussion: progress towards water-related Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region	8	E/ESCWA/C.3/2023/7
Proposed programme plan for 2024 in the field of water resources in the light of regional priorities for the period 2021–2025	9	E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/8
Advancing the climate change agenda in the water and energy sectors		E/ESCWA/C.3/2023/CRP.1 E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/CRP.1
List of documents		E/ESCWA/C.4/2023/INF.2