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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report**First Consultation in the Arab Region to Prepare for the 2023 Midterm
Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade
Beirut, 24 February 2021****Summary**

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) organized the “First Consultation in the Arab Region to prepare for the 2023 Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade” virtually on 24 February 2021. The meeting discussed a collaborative preliminary workplan for Arab regional preparations leading to the United Nations Conference for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade in March 2023. Discussions comprised how to proceed with organizing the regional preparatory meeting for the global conference; preparing the regional contribution to the midterm comprehensive review report; and the different ways for activating the engagement of regional stakeholders in this preparatory process. Participants were also invited to confirm their interest in contributing to the preparatory process. All participant institutions expressed their full commitment to the regional Water Action Decade preparatory process. It was agreed to engage in specific landmark events and consider several existing regional instruments and mechanisms to identify progress made on water-related actions in the region and raise awareness for the Water Action Decade. In addition, a next consultation was planned for April to discuss more specific guidance on the scope of the regional contribution to the midterm comprehensive review report as well as the size and scale of the planned preparatory meeting.

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CONTENTS

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1-3	3
I. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION	4-19	3
A. Overview.....	5-8	3
B. Planning for the regional preparatory meeting.....	9-11	4
C. Preparing the regional contribution to the midterm comprehensive review report.....	12-14	5
D. Engaging regional stakeholders in the preparatory process and the decade.....	14-18	5
E. Commitments and next steps.....	19	6
II. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING	20-23	7
A. Date and venue.....	20	7
B. Opening of the meeting.....	21-22	7
C. Participants.....	23	7
ANNEX I		8
ANNEX II		10

Introduction

1. The “First Consultation in the Arab Region to prepare for the 2023 Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade” was organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The meeting was convened virtually on 24 February 2021 from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm Beirut time (GMT+2) using the Microsoft Teams platform.
2. The overall objective of this first consultation was to discuss a collaborative road map for Arab regional preparations leading to the United Nations Conference for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade in March 2023. Specifically, the meeting aimed to discuss how to proceed with: (a) organizing the regional preparatory meeting for the global conference; (b) preparing the regional contribution to the midterm comprehensive review report; and (c) activating the engagement of regional stakeholders in this preparatory process. Participants were also invited to confirm their interest in substantively and financially contributing to the preparatory process.
3. The meeting consisted of three sessions: Session I was the opening and overview, Session II tackled formulating a roadmap for Arab regional preparations, and Session III comprised commitments and next steps. Section I of this meeting report highlights the main topics of discussion, while section II reviews the organization of work. The meeting documentation and background information is available at the following website: <https://www.unescwa.org/Consultation-Comprehensive-Review-Water-Action-Decade>

I. TOPICS OF DISCUSSIONS

4. Main discussion outcomes are presented in the following sections according to the substantive sessions of the meeting. Landmark events and instruments to consider for engagement in the Water Action Decade (WAD) regional preparatory process that were mentioned during discussions are summarized in Annex I.

A. OVERVIEW

5. ESCWA opened the session with an overview presentation of the Water Action Decade preparatory process. The status of water as a cross cutting issue was highlighted, with the central role of water recognized as a connector and key element to the global sustainable development related agendas. ESCWA then provided a detailed background on the various global and regional mandates underlying the Water Action Decade.
6. The International Decade for Action: Water for Sustainable Development, commonly referred to as the Water Action Decade 2018-2028 was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2016 to promote water as a pillar to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizing that this should be pursued through global processes as well as regional and national collaborative actions. Pursuant to UNGA resolutions of 2018 and 2020, a Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade is planned for 2023 to report on progress made in implementing the Decade's objectives, identify possible obstacles in achieving them and pinpoint innovative ways to support their implementation and accelerate progress. The conference will be preceded by regional and global meetings and that preparations should include a review process, and a progress report is expected to be issued under the auspices of the Secretary General at the global level. The Water Action Decade has been endorsed in the Arab region and demonstrated by resolutions and recommendations adopted by Arab States in intergovernmental and regional forums, including by the Arab Ministerial Water Council, the ESCWA Committee on Water Resources and regional consultations on water. United Nations System processes aimed at furthering regional-level collaboration in the five regions framing the work of the United Nations Secretariat also reference the Water Action Decade namely through the work of the UN System Regional Collaboration Platforms (RCPs) and the UN-Water Expert Group on Regional Level Coordination.
7. ESCWA further highlighted the official launch of the SDG6 Global Acceleration Framework at the High-Level Political Forum in July 2020, which needs to be considered as an instrument to raise the profile

and provide input to the Water Action Decade midterm review, as the latter will constitute a critical milestone for the Global Acceleration Framework. A review of the roadmap leading to the midterm review of the Water Action Decade in 2023 was also presented. Lastly, the objectives of the meeting as a first consultation for regional preparations leading to the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade were reviewed, stressing that engagement in this first consultation provides an opportunity to coordinate across the various global, regional national and institutional arrangements in support of the midterm review in the Arab region. Ultimately, the aim of the consultative discussions for this meeting would be to formulate a roadmap for Arab regional preparations.

8. During the ensuing discussion, preliminary suggestions were made on how to streamline actions and activities to support the regional preparations. It was suggested that the 5th Arab Water Forum (Abu Dhabi, September 2021) could be a valuable avenue with possibly organizing a session on the WAD on the third day. Considering the Arab Water Strategy and its action plan was also highlighted, whereby progress made on the regional implementation of the strategy and links to SDG6 could be reported on and presented for the regional preparatory meeting. Also, FAO's Water Scarcity initiative and its related collaborative framework was mentioned, as it is an important development that supports the IBCs and is not restricted to the work of the United Nations in the region but includes a large number of entities working on water-related issues. That mechanism with the regular meeting of the working clusters could support the process for the midterm review and for achieving tangible results for the decade. Having regional dialogues on the WAD during the upcoming Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (March 2021) was also suggested.

B. PLANNING FOR THE REGIONAL PREPARATORY MEETING

9. Consensus was reached on the tentative timeline for the regional preparatory meeting to be held in February 2022. Organizing sessions to raise awareness or present progress made on the WAD in the Arab region in relevant regional events leading to the preparatory meeting was strongly encouraged. It was also emphasized that the WAD focuses on all water-related goals in the 2030 Agenda, not solely on SDG6. For information and for planning purposes, relevant global and regional events were also mentioned during the discussion namely Cairo Water Week (October 2021) and the World Water Forum (Dakar, March 2022). Clarifications were also given concerning timelines for the global WAD process: regional inputs stemming from the regional preparatory meeting should be submitted to UNDESA by August-September 2022 to prepare for the report that will be issued by the Secretary General in March 2023. It is thus important to have as much consolidated regional input as possible in line with these dates, noting that the upcoming Ramadan period will fall during April-May 2021.

10. As a preliminary thematic scope for the meeting, it was agreed to focus on the priority areas and means of implementation identified during the regional preparatory meeting on water issues which informed the 2018 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The four priority areas are the following: (1) Strengthening integrated water resources management to cope with water scarcity; (2) Enhancing cooperation on shared water resources; (3) Water is a core component of climate change adaptation and natural disaster risk reduction; and (4) Access to water services for all through improving water-related infrastructure. The means of implementation include: (1) Regional Cooperation; (2) National coherence and coordination across sectors through participatory approaches; (3) Technology transfer; (4) Financing and investment; and (5) Capacity development.¹ It was suggested to also consider these priority areas within a Covid-19 pandemic perspective and possibly future unforeseen pandemics. Furthermore, the following focus issues were mentioned: water security, food security, energy security and climate security (the three of which imply jobs, gender equality, health and sustainability), the water energy food nexus, water and health, flood management as a specific item to climate change, water under occupation, water and climate, innovative technology, research and capacity building, sustainable finance and private sector engagement, access to finance including end-user finance

¹ Source: [Outcome Document of the Regional Preparatory Meeting on Water Issues for the 2018 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development and High-Level Political Forum \(Beirut, March 2018\)](#)

and donor support, governance under the scope of IWRM priority area. It was also emphasized to highlight the issue of resource sustainability as anchored within water resources, not as a stand-alone priority but rather emphasize sustainability in one of the priority areas formulation, e.g. “within sustainable limits” etc.

11. Participants discussed the possible levels and types of engagement for the preparatory meeting. It was agreed to target high-level officials with support from regional organisations and experts. As a multilateral process, it was emphasized that the course of action should involve the ministerial council level alongside technical expertise and possibly academia and civil society as well.

C. PREPARING THE REGIONAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE MIDTERM COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW REPORT

12. Based on discussions, a preliminary proposal for the report format was to consider producing a comprehensive report based on all inputs stemming from the regional preparatory process, along with a brief summarized policy paper that would be included in the Secretary General’s report, noting that the latter is already usually short in length. It was recommended to keep this item on the agenda for further consultations with regards to the report format and contents.

13. Several ongoing processes that could support regional contributions and reporting on the WAD were mentioned in the discussion. Updates were provided on the 2020 Data Drive, part of the UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Sustainable Development Goal 6 (IMI-SDG6) which was completed for most SDG6 indicators at the end of 2020 and submitted to UN Statistics. Most of the custodians will be issuing updated reports on progress made between the first and the second reporting exercise this year. Also mentioned was the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) which held regional consultations on SDG 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 in January 2021 with all government ministries related to statistics and WASH. The JMP team will submit their inputs by March 2021, with final data calculations to be issued after that. In addition, it was highlighted that the High-Level Joint Committee for Agriculture and Water in the Arab Region (with a meeting planned before June 2021) and the Arab Joint Ministerial Council of Agriculture and Water (session to be held in the 3rd quarter of 2021) need to be considered as they constitute important elements to support the League of Arab States for regional policy coherence and also have outcomes stemming from its processes that can be used to support the WAD. It was also mentioned that the next meeting of the Arab Ministerial Water Council would be held in the last week of June 2021.

14. ESCWA indicated that all regional agencies are currently creating regional profiles for custodians concerning all SDGs. Regional knowledge hubs are thus being created by each region, which could support the regional WAD process however it is unsure at which stage the progress is regionally. Globally, data will be available in July and this can be considered as valuable internationally vetted information with additional regional analysis to be made. It was also suggested to start reaching out to Arab States on their implementation progress of the Arab Water Strategy and its Action Plan, to integrate those inputs into the WAD regional preparatory process and reporting. Country inputs could be summarized into 1 pager briefs for ease of reporting, and relevant ministries other than water ministries (e.g. environment, interior, housing, etc.) could be consulted to collectively discuss those inputs. Finally, participants emphasized the need to gather inputs from regional organizations, civil society and scientific research communities as well on their activities and outputs relevant to the WAD process.

D. ENGAGING REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE PREPARATORY PROCESS AND THE DECADE

15. During the discussions, it was emphasized that landmark events revolving around the theme of water need to be highly considered in this regional preparatory process, as they constitute opportunities to expand the range of stakeholders engaged and conduct interventions to raise awareness about the WAD through various networks, all of which could feed into the preparatory meeting once consolidated. Wide stakeholder engagement was also suggested namely parliament representatives, local level stakeholders, civil society organizations, relevant members of the water scarcity initiative or other members of the IBCs working on water related issues beyond the ones who are part of the specific set of mandated issues.

16. Participants also highlighted potential avenues for contribution to the preparatory process. The meeting of the governing board of the Arab Water Council (45 members including the 22 water ministries representatives, private sector, NGOs etc.) during the 5th Arab Water Forum would be an opportunity to engage or present or solicit information and outputs from that end. Ministries of environment could also be engaged through CEDARE. In addition to the Arab Ministerial Water Council, which had already called for Arab regional engagement in the Decade, the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW), which includes a number of Arab countries, was also suggested as a possible forum to approach. Similarly, Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) global initiative which include some Arab countries is to be considered. The International Association of Hydrogeologists through its scientific network of groundwater specialist working in the MENA region expressed its support in the process, noting an upcoming Groundwater Summit in 2022 during which the WAD could be showcased. The work of IWMI / Water and Energy for Food Grand Challenge (WE4F) experience is a new track in the region that should be highlighted. Innovation incubator start-ups for water is a new business track that should be stressed and supported through this process and can support the decade target in the Arab region.

17. The necessity to engage the youth in the process was also highly emphasized. The Youth Parliament for Water was highlighted in this regard. In addition, UNICEF mentioned the global initiative Generation Unlimited (GenU) of which it is part of, noting that it will hold a high-level regional meeting on IBCs in the fourth quarter of this year with youth from the region. This could be a forum to tap into and engage into the WAD and get their input into this process for youth.

18. Other landmark events mentioned include the yearly celebrations of World Water Day on 22 March, as well as the yearly Arab Water Day on 2 March. Participants were encouraged to showcase the WAD during these events and suggest other relevant events to engage stakeholders in the WAD process.

E. COMMITMENTS AND NEXT STEPS

19. All participant institutions expressed their full commitment to the WAD preparatory process. In summary, the following was agreed to:

- Conduct a session on the WAD during the 5th Arab Water Forum (Abu Dhabi, 21-23 September 2021).
- Hold the regional preparatory meeting in February 2022 as a tentative date.
- The summary of the Arab regional report on the WAD will be used to inform the preparation of the report of the United Nations Secretary General to the WAD.
- Short policy briefs (1-3 pages) with key policy messages generated from prior consultations and regional contributions to the WAD will help to inform the preparation of the regional meeting and regional report.
- Consider a wider range of engagement than the usual stakeholders to ensure the process is as participatory as possible.
- Next consultation meeting to be tentatively held during the first half of April 2021 as a two-hour long virtual event and build on outcomes of the next UN-Water meeting planned for March 2021. The meeting will include more specific guidance on the scope of the report as well as the size and scale of the planned preparatory meeting. Participation in the consultation meeting would be extended to external stakeholders.

- Participants are strongly encouraged to share by email suggestions about other ideas, events to raise awareness about the WAD, and additional stakeholders to engage. All inputs are to be consolidated for the next consultation meeting.

II. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

A. DATE AND VENUE

20. The meeting was held virtually on 24 February 2021 from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm Beirut time (GMT+2).

B. OPENING OF THE MEETING

21. ESCWA opened the meeting by welcoming participants and highlighted the central and strategic role of water globally and particularly in the Arab region, stressing the need to advance the water agenda under the framework of the Water Action Decade. It was pointed out that regional preparations for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade falls under different global, regional, national and institutional frameworks and that engagement in these consultations is crucial to coordinate across these various arrangements in support of the Water Action Decade midterm review in the Arab region. Finally, ESCWA emphasized that the expected outcome of the discussions should include clear guidelines and concrete next steps on how to move forward in the regional preparations, highlighting the continuous support of ESCWA in this important process.

22. Following a tour de table, ESCWA delivered an overview presentation on the Water Action Decade preparatory process. The meeting documentation is available at: <https://www.unescwa.org/Consultation-Comprehensive-Review-Water-Action-Decade>

C. PARTICIPANTS

23. This first consultative meeting gathered 15 participants and comprised the designated representatives of regional and national organizations, League of Arab States, and United Nations organizations that serve in the Technical Scientific and Advisory Committee of the Arab Ministerial Water Council, the Regional Collaborative Platform/Issues-based Coalition (RCP-IBC) work pillar on Water, Food Security and Nutrition, and/or the UN-Water Regional Discussion Group for Arab States. The list of participants is provided in Annex II.

ANNEX I

Summary of landmark events, coordination meetings, instruments and processes to consider for potential engagement in the Water Action Decade regional preparatory process

A. *Events and coordination mechanisms*

2021

- Arab Water Day 2021 (2 March 2021)
- UN-Water meeting (15-17 March 2021)
- High-Level Meeting of the President of the General Assembly on the Water Action Decade (18 March 2021)
- World Water Day 2021 (22 March 2021)
- Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (29-31 March 2021)
- High-Level Joint Committee for Agriculture and Water in the Arab Region (planned before June 2021)
- Arab Ministerial Water Council (last week of June 2021)
- 5th Arab Water Forum organized by the Arab Water Council (Abu Dhabi, 21-23 September 2021)
- Cairo Water Week 2021 (24-28 October 2021) on Water, Population and Global Change: Challenges and Opportunities
- Arab Joint Ministerial Council of Water and Agriculture (possibly in the 3rd quarter of 2021)
- Generation Unlimited (GenU) for youth engagement, a high-level regional meeting (possibly in the 4th quarter of 2021)

2022

- Arab Water Day 2022 (2 March 2022)
- World Water Forum (Dakar, 21- 26 March 2022) on Water Security for Peace and Development
- World Water Day 2022 (22 March 2022)
- IAH Groundwater Summit (2022)

2023

- Arab Water Day 2023 (2 March 2023)
- World Water Day 2023 (22 March 2023)
- UN Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, Water for Sustainable Development(New York, 22-24 March 2023)

B. Instruments and platforms

- Arab Ministerial Water Council
- Arab Water Strategy and its Action Plan
- SDG6 Global Acceleration Framework
- Water Scarcity Initiative and related collaborative framework
- United Nations System Regional Collaboration Platform (RCP) in the Arab Region
- UN-Water Expert Group on Regional Level Coordination - Regional Discussion Group for Arab States
- Water and Energy for Food Grand Challenge (WE4F) by IWMI
- World Water Development Report 2023
- 2020 Data Drive part of the UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Sustainable Development Goal 6 (IMI-SDG6)
- WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP)
- Youth Parliament for Water
- Sanitation and Water for All (SWA)
- Outputs from the High-Level Joint Committee for Water and Agriculture in the Arab Region and the Arab Joint Ministerial Council of Water and Agriculture

ANNEX II

List of Participants

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