



Water for Peace

World Water Day 2024 Factsheet



What is World Water Day?

Every year, World Water Day (22 March) raises awareness and inspires action to tackle the water and sanitation crisis. It is a United Nations observance, coordinated by UN-Water and led by one or more UN-Water Members and Partners with a related mandate.

The theme is proposed in advance by UN-Water and is aligned with the annual publication of the UN World Water Development Report, published by UNESCO on behalf of UN-Water, with its production coordinated by the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP).

In 2024, the theme of World Water Day is 'Leveraging water for peace' and the name of the World Water Development Report is 'Leveraging Water for Peace and Prosperity'. The World Water Day campaign is simply called 'Water for Peace.'

'Water for Peace' explained

Water can create peace or spark conflict.

When water is scarce or polluted, or when people have unequal or no access, tensions can rise between communities and countries.

More than 3 billion people worldwide depend on water that crosses national borders. Yet, out of 153 countries that share rivers, lakes and aquifers with their neighbours, only 24 countries report having cooperation agreements for all their shared water.¹

As climate change impacts increase, there is an urgent need, within and between countries, to unite around protecting and conserving our most precious resource.

As populations grow, water will become increasingly important in the fight against poverty and the deterioration of the environment.

Cooperation on water can build vital resilience to extreme weather events and help populations to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate.

Public health and prosperity, food and energy systems, economic productivity and environmental integrity all rely on a well-functioning and equitably managed water cycle.

This means that non-discrimination and equality in ensuring access to water and sanitation can have a positive ripple effect across society.

Peaceful cooperation around water can flow into peaceful cooperation in all sectors.

By working together to balance everyone's human rights and needs, water can be a stabilizing force and a catalyst for sustainable development.

¹ UN-Water (2021), *Summary Progress Update 2021: SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all*:
<https://www.unwater.org/publications/summary-progress-update-2021-sdg-6-water-and-sanitation-all>



Over time, there have been many more incidences of cooperation than conflict over water, but there is much more to do.

We must act upon the realization that water is not only a resource to be used and competed over – it is a human right, intrinsic to every aspect of life.

At the local and national level, different water users – particularly water and sanitation utilities, energy, food and industry – must cooperate through an integrated water resources management approach and promote a circular economy that fulfils people’s human rights.

At the basin level, countries should develop agreements and set up institutions to peacefully manage water resources that cross international borders.

Cooperation on transboundary waters is essential for peace and prosperity. Governments should cooperate bilaterally, regionally or globally, for example through signing up to and implementing the United Nations Water Convention and Watercourses Convention.

We all have a part to play.

As individuals, we can use water more carefully, reducing stress on the environment and water infrastructure. We can also hold elected officials, companies, organizations and others to account for their obligations and promises on water.

In our working lives, we can also ensure that all our activities are done responsibly and protect water resources and ecosystems, according to the law.

We all need to unite around water and use water for peace, laying the foundations of a more stable and prosperous tomorrow.

How can water be linked to conflict and instability?

Water often plays a role during conflict. For instance:

1. **Water can be a trigger** when interests of different water users, including States and provinces, clash and are perceived as irreconcilable, or when water quantity and/or quality decreases, which may affect human- and ecosystem health.
2. **Water can be a weapon** during armed conflict – used by both State and non-State actors – as a means to gain or maintain control over territory and populations or as a means to pressurize opponent groups.
3. **Water can be a casualty** of conflict when water resources, water systems or utility employees are intentional or incidental casualties or targets of violence. Attacks on civilian infrastructure, including water systems, pose serious health risks² and violate international humanitarian law.

² Talhami, M. and M. Zeitoun (2021), "The impact of attacks on urban services II: Reverberating effects of damage to water and wastewater systems on infectious disease". International Review of the Red Cross 102(915): 1293 – 1325: <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/impact-of-attacks-on-urban-services-ii-damage-to-wastewater-systems-infectious-disease-915>



Water can be a multiplying factor in complex conflict or fragility settings, for example, when the inability of a government to provide basic water services leads to a delegitimization of State institutions and ignites social unrest, or if other factors such as food insecurity, unemployment and internal migration coincide with water-related stress, all culminating in instability at various governance levels.³

Global variability in the water cycle

Global variability in the hydrological cycle is present, substantial, and on the rise. These notable shifts are due to the impacts of climate change and ongoing human activities.

Water variability has a direct impact on populations, economies and ecosystems, as it makes the system less predictable or requiring more complex management practices. Water management becomes harder, with consequences on flood and drought management, water quality, and the equitable and sustainable availability of water for all uses.

To effectively adapt to the evolving hydrological conditions, consistent monitoring and assessment of our water resources are crucial⁴ to build a common understanding of water-related problems, from which agreed solutions can be developed; while a lack of data can contribute to fuelling conflicts.

How can water be a tool for peace?

Water scarcity is an increasing problem on every continent, with poorer communities most badly affected. To build resilience against climate change and to serve a growing population equitably and sustainably, an integrated and inclusive approach, centred on human rights, and based on sound, trusted data, must be taken to managing this finite resource.

In this context, water can be a catalyst for peace at all governance levels.

- **At the community level**, water can bring together different water users or 'rights-holders' – often from different ethnicities or religious groups – around a common cause and provide an entry point for dialogue, reconciliation and peacebuilding.
- **At the national level**, the need to cooperate across different water-using sectors might provide a starting point for coordination across interests.

³ Gleick, P. and Shimabuku, M. (2023), "Water-related conflicts: definitions, data, and trends from the water conflict chronology". Environ. Res. Lett. 18 034022, p.2-3: <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/acbb8f>

⁴ WMO (2023), *State of Global Water Resources 2023* report: <https://public.wmo.int/en/our-mandate/water/state-of-global-water-resources-2023>



- **At the transboundary level**, cooperation over shared water resources and 'hydrodiplomacy' can be a starting point for communication and broader cooperation, including beyond water resources. In post-conflict situations, water cooperation plays a pivotal role in rebuilding trust and fostering long-term stability, offering a tangible foundation for collaboration and mutual understanding.

At all levels, the various actors must ensure the effective participation of rights-holders, particularly of riparian (which means adjacent to the water body) communities, to prevent internal and cross-border conflicts. Transparency, accountability and open availability of information are also key to guarantee a human rights-based approach to water management.

What are the benefits of uniting around water?

Water cooperation across borders and sectors has proven to generate benefits that accelerate progress across Sustainable Development Goals, including delivering safe drinking water and sanitation, enhancing food security, sustaining healthy livelihoods and ecosystems, helping to address resilience to climate change, contributing to disaster risk reduction, providing renewable energy, supporting cities and industry, and fostering regional integration and peace.⁵

Transboundary cooperation is essential for creating enabling conditions for investment and security. It also enhances preparedness to protect ecosystems and human health, especially in case of crisis such as drought, flood or accidental pollution.

How can we work together to use water for peace?

The Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace was created in 2015 in Geneva at the initiative of 15 co-convening UN Member States to analyse water in the context of the maintenance of peace and security. The Panel's landmark report, *A matter of survival*, gives concrete proposals and recommendations to enable water to be an instrument of peace. (See link in 'Further reading' below).

The three general principles for working together to use water for peace are:

- **Water cooperation should be inclusive.** Water resources serve and are affected by multiple stakeholders, including civil society, government (national and local), Indigenous Peoples, the media, the private sector and the scientific community, at multiple levels. Intercultural, gender, age and inclusion aspects of water cooperation, and diverse stakeholder values, should be considered with regard to water governance systems.

⁵ UNECE and UNESCO (2023), Concept paper for interactive dialogue 4 at the UN 2023 Water Conference: *Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Water Cooperation, Cross Sectoral Cooperation, including Scientific Cooperation, and Water Across the 2030 Agenda*: <https://sdgs.un.org/conferences/water2023/events/interactive-dialogue-4>



- **Water cooperation should be cross-sectoral.** Bringing together water, energy, agriculture, environment and others helps to better manage trade-offs and can amplify the benefits that accrue from collective action while also safeguarding ecosystems. Multilevel governance systems are key to breaking sectoral silos in a way that can deliver legitimate, equitable and sustainable outcomes.
- **Water cooperation should also be action-oriented.** The benefits that cooperative processes can offer to communities, sectors, ecosystems and countries across the Sustainable Development Goals can only be realized if concrete steps are taken to address funding and financing gaps, insufficient and inaccessible data and information, capacity development shortfalls, weak governance systems that result in poorly coordinated and uneven power relationships among stakeholders, and the slow introduction and uptake of innovative practices and technologies.⁶ Early and efficient cooperation over water resources can also prevent water being a trigger, a weapon or a casualty in times of armed conflicts. Working towards the establishment of formal arrangements over river basins and aquifers by the riparian States is key for long-term successful cooperation.

In general, science and education are essential, as they enable people to exchange and benefit from knowledge and data, and the development of shared understanding and solutions. Looking to the future, educating people – starting at school – about water’s role in peace, stability, social equity and prosperity, is crucial to building the awareness and skills that will ensure a more sustainable and peaceful world is created with water at its core.

What can I do?

We can all use water as a tool for peace.

Individuals, families, community groups, organizations, institutions and governments – everyone can take action as part of the World Water Day 2024 campaign.

There are three ways to get involved:

1. Learn

- Explore the connection between water and peace, and read inspirational stories from around the world: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/water-day>
- Delve into UN-Water's Water Facts: <https://www.unwater.org/water-facts>
- Read the UN World Water Development Report, launched on 22 March, on ‘Leveraging water for peace and prosperity’: <https://www.unwater.org/publications/un-world-water-development-report>
- Look into the water and sanitation issues in your country or region on the SDG 6 Data Portal: <https://www.sdg6data.org/en>
- Explore more resources in the sections below.

⁶ UNECE and UNESCO (2023), Concept paper for interactive dialogue 4 at the UN 2023 Water Conference: *Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Water Cooperation, Cross Sectoral Cooperation, including Scientific Cooperation, and Water Across the 2030 Agenda*: <https://sdgs.un.org/conferences/water2023/events/interactive-dialogue-4>



2. Share

- Post World Water Day social media assets using #WorldWaterDay to generate debate and raise awareness – available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/water-day/resources>
- Are you already working in the field of water and peace, and would like to get involved in the campaign? Let us know! Send us an email to campaigns@unwater.org and tell us more about your work and how you could get involved in the campaign.

3. Act

Every year, tens of thousands of people get involved in World Water Day in the run-up to 22 March. Share photos from your activities using #WorldWaterDay. Here are some examples of things you can do:

- Play football for peace. Organize a local Football for Peace match and/or ask your favourite club, or national team, to host one. (See box for details).
- Think about what water and peace mean to you and make an artwork, installation, song or film as inspiration for others.
- Organize a talk in your school, university, community, office or organization to start a conversation on water for peace.
- Organize a lakeside or river shore clean-up campaign, preferably involving the communities that share the resource.
- Host a concert, play or sports event to draw attention to local water and peace issues.
- If you are a teacher or student, organize/propose a lesson on water or get the whole school involved in water and peace-themed activities.
- Organize a community clean-up of local streams, rivers, lakes and beaches.
- Visit a lake, wetland or river and learn more about your closest water ecosystem.
- Investigate if the water you use comes from a water basin that is shared across a political boundary.
- Organize a photo contest or local exhibition themed on water and peace.
- Contribute to or launch citizen science participatory projects aimed at promoting knowledge of local water bodies, also by collecting data and information.



Football for Peace

Football – or ‘soccer’ – is played on every continent by millions of people every week.

Like all sport, it has the power to transcend boundaries and unite people – players and spectators – in a spirit of peace and harmony.

‘Football for Peace matches’ are being held all over the world – from iconic stadiums with famous players to local parks with amateur participants.

Are you connected with a school, community or work team? Do you have a favourite professional club or national selection? Then you could hold or help organize a Football for Peace match.

Find out more about Football for Peace matches here and share your journey with the hashtag #WorldWaterDay: <https://www.footballforpeace.org.uk/peace-matches>

Key facts

- 2.2 billion still live without safely managed drinking water, including 115 million people who drink surface water (WHO/UNICEF, 2023).⁷
- Roughly half of the world’s population is experiencing severe water scarcity for at least part of the year (IPCC, 2022).⁸ These numbers are expected to increase, exacerbated by climate change and population growth (WMO, 2022).⁹
- Only 0.5 per cent of water on Earth is useable and available freshwater – and climate change is dangerously affecting that supply. Over the past twenty years, terrestrial water storage – including soil moisture, snow and ice – has dropped at a rate of 1 cm per year, with major ramifications for water security (WMO, 2021).¹⁰
- Climate change, population growth and increasing water scarcity will put pressure on food supply (IPCC, 2014)¹¹ as most of the freshwater used, about 72 per cent on average, is used for agriculture (UN-Water, 2023).¹²

⁷ WHO/UNICEF (2023), *WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP) – Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2022: Special focus on gender*:

<https://www.unwater.org/publications/who/unicef-joint-monitoring-program-update-report-2023>

⁸ IPCC (2022), *Sixth Assessment Report: Fact sheet – Food and Water*:

https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/outreach/IPCC_AR6_WGII_FactSheet_FoodAndWater.pdf

⁹ WMO (2022), Press release: “Protect our people and future generations: Water and Climate Leaders call for urgent action”:

<https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/protect-our-people-and-future-generations-water-and-climate-leaders-call-urgent>

¹⁰ WMO (2021), *2021 State of Climate Services: Water*:

https://library.wmo.int/viewer/57630/download?file=1278_en.pdf&type=pdf&navigator=1

¹¹ IPCC/Jiménez Cisneros et al (2014), Chapter 3: “Freshwater Resources”. *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-Chap3_FINAL.pdf

¹² UN-Water (2023), *Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023*: <https://www.unwater.org/publications/sdg-6-synthesis-report-2023>



- Water-related disasters have dominated the list of disasters over the past 50 years and account for 70 per cent of all deaths related to natural disasters (World Bank, 2022).¹³
- Children under the age of 15 living in countries affected by protracted conflict are, on average, almost three times more likely to die from diarrhoeal diseases caused by a lack of safe water, sanitation and hygiene than by direct violence (UNICEF, 2019).¹⁴
- Transboundary waters account for 60 per cent of the world's freshwater flows, and 153 countries have territory within at least 1 of the 310 transboundary river and lake basins and inventoried 468 transboundary aquifer systems (UN-Water, 2023).¹⁵
- Only 24 countries report that all their transboundary basins are covered by cooperation arrangements (UN-Water, 2021).¹⁶
- The benefits of investing in water and sanitation outweigh the costs, as it can improve health, productivity, environment, and social outcomes. Every US\$ 1 invested in water and sanitation yields a return of US\$ 4.3. (UN-Water GLAAS, 2014).¹⁷ In transboundary rivers and aquifers this is especially related to hydropower production, flood and drought management, water quality, and ecosystem conservation.

Water-related mechanisms for peace

UN Water Convention (The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes): <https://unece.org/environment-policy/water/about-the-convention/introduction>

UN Watercourses Convention (The Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses): <https://unece.org/environment-policy/water/un-watercourses-convention>

The Convention on Wetlands (The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat): <https://www.ramsar.org/>

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

The Paris Agreement (on climate change): <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030: <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030-17988>

¹³ World Bank (2022), Webpage: "Water resources management":

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/waterresourcesmanagement>

¹⁴ UNICEF (2019), Press release: "Children living in protracted conflicts are three times more likely to die from water-related diseases than from violence": <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-living-protracted-conflicts-are-three-times-more-likely-die-water-related>

¹⁵ UN-Water (2023), *Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023*: <https://www.unwater.org/publications/sdg-6-synthesis-report-2023>

¹⁶ UN-Water (2021), *Summary Progress Update 2021: SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all*: <https://www.unwater.org/publications/summary-progress-update-2021-sdg-6-water-and-sanitation-for-all>

¹⁷ UN-Water GLAAS (2014), *Investing in Water and Sanitation: Increasing Access, Reducing Inequalities*: <https://www.unwater.org/publications/un-water-glaas-2014-investing-water-and-sanitation>



Draft articles on the Law of Transboundary Aquifers 2008:

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000182431>

Integrated Water Resources Management: <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/disasters-conflicts/where-we-work/sudan/what-integrated-water-resources-management>

Further reading:

Geneva Water Hub (2019), *Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructures* and further developments:

<https://www.genevawaterhub.org/resource/geneva-list-principles-protection-water-infrastructure>

Geneva Water Hub (2017), *A Matter of Survival* report of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace: <https://www.genevawaterhub.org/resource/matter-survival>

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to safe drinking water and sanitation: *Water as an argument for peace, twinning and cooperation (A/78/253)*:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a78253-report-special-rapporteur-human-rights-safe-drinking-water-and>

UNESCO (2024), *UN World Water Development Report 2024*:

<https://www.unwater.org/publications/un-world-water-development-report>

UNESCO (2022), *Transboundary Aquifers: Challenges and the Way Forward*. Sanchez, R. (Ed). Paris, UNESCO: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383775>

UNICEF (2021), *Water under fire* – report series on the role of water in conflicts around the world: <https://www.unicef.org/stories/fast-facts-water-sanitation-hygiene-conflict>

UN-Water (2020), *UN-Water Policy Brief on the United Nations global water conventions: Fostering sustainable development and peace*:

https://www.unwater.org/sites/default/files/app/uploads/2021/01/UN-Water_Policy_Brief_United_Nations_Global_Water_Conventions.pdf

UN-Water (2023), *Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation*: https://www.unwater.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/UN-Water_SDG6_SynthesisReport_2023.pdf

GFDRR/World Bank (2018), *Assessment of the State of Hydrological Services in Developing Countries*: <https://www.gfdrr.org/en/publication/assessment-state-hydrological-services-developing-countries>