



UNITED NATIONS
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION
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WHITEPAPER

Accelerating Water Action Through UN-Private Sector Engagement

A Framework for Collaboration and Impact

September 2026





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Forewords

H.E. Retno Marsudi, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Water

Water is fundamental to sustainable development. It underpins health, food security, economic growth, climate resilience, gender equality and women's empowerment, healthy ecosystems and many other agendas. Yet progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 6 is inadequate compared to the water-related challenges that continue to grow in scale and complexity.

Meeting this challenge calls for renewed ambition and a new model of collaboration beyond business as usual. The leadership of countries, their governments and communities, is essential in making progress on the water and sanitation agenda. Governments play a key role, guided by the interests of the people they serve.

The United Nations has long supported countries through its trusted science, global norms, policy expertise and convening capacity. These remain essential strengths. But efforts to achieve SDG 6 depend on the ability to work more effectively, involving all relevant stakeholders: the private sector, civil society and financial institutions, combining our respective capabilities to accelerate implementation.

This white paper reflects an innovative effort to do so.

The white paper aims to set out a framework for countries, the United Nations, and the private sector to strengthen and complement each other's capacities in accelerating water and sanitation actions to achieve SDG 6. This effort starts by laying out the distinctive strengths and potential contribution that the UN holds, and identifies partnership models that allow the UN to give support to actions that deliver greater impact on the ground.

The years ahead present a critical opportunity. As governments and businesses increasingly recognize that water resilience underpins sustainable development, we must transform this momentum into lasting partnerships that advance shared goals. The UN holds immense potential in complementing and strengthening the triangular collaboration between countries, the UN, and the private sector.

Achieving SDG 6 is both a water challenge and a development imperative. By working together, we can accelerate progress towards a more resilient, equitable and sustainable future.

UNDP, UNIDO, UN Global Compact

Water has become a strategic business issue that reaches far beyond its traditional environmental and social framing.

Across industries, businesses are facing growing risks from water scarcity, flooding, pollution and deteriorating ecosystems. These challenges affect operations, supply chains, investment decisions and long-term competitiveness. At the same time, they present new opportunities to innovate, strengthen resilience and create shared value.

The private sector is already demonstrating that it can be a powerful partner in accelerating water action. Companies are developing new technologies, financing infrastructure, improving water stewardship, strengthening supply chains and supporting communities where they operate. Yet the scale of the challenge requires these efforts to move beyond isolated initiatives toward broader, more coordinated partnerships.

The United Nations has an important role to play in making this possible. By combining its global reach, technical expertise and relationships with governments with the innovation, investment and implementation capabilities of business, the UN can help create partnerships that are both commercially viable and developmentally impactful.

This white paper outlines how businesses can engage more effectively with the UN system, identifies partnership archetypes that can be replicated and scaled, and demonstrates the contribution that each partner brings to achieving SDG 6.

Water resilience underpins sustainable development, resilient economies and thriving businesses alike. By working together, we have an opportunity to transform water from a growing business risk into a shared platform for innovation, investment and sustainable growth.

Executive Summary

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, has just over three years left to be achieved, and progress is not on track to get there.

On current trends, three billion people could remain without safely managed sanitation by 2030, two billion without safely managed drinking water, and one billion without a handwashing facility with soap and water at home.

Five interconnected constraints continue to hold back progress:

1. Water projects are structurally **under-financed**.
2. **Regulation and standards** are often inconsistent and fragmented.
3. Decision-makers often lack the **data, technical expertise and market intelligence** to identify problems or scale solutions.
4. Even where solutions exist, they often are not delivered at the **speed or scale required**, or **do not reach the markets** where they would have the greatest impact.
5. The **actors** who need to work together too often **do not find, understand or coordinate** with one another.

The private sector remains significantly underrepresented relative to its potential contribution to SDG 6. It has contributed only 9% of Water Action Agenda commitments and participates in just 13% of the roughly 1,800 registered SDG 6 initiatives worldwide, with only 5% of these structured as genuine partnerships. Yet water security is increasingly fundamental to business continuity, resilient supply chains, productivity and long-term competitiveness, while companies can contribute capital, technology, innovation, operational expertise and market reach. At the same time, growing pressure on public and development finance reinforces the need to mobilize these complementary capabilities more effectively. Closing this gap therefore requires stronger and more strategic engagement between the United Nations (UN) system and the private sector, building on the distinctive strengths that can make the UN system a credible and valuable partner for private-sector action on water.

UN entities collectively span the full SDG 6 spectrum, but they do not all engage the private sector in the same way. Their mandates range from norm- and standard-setting through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to science through the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), policy through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and industrial implementation through the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). That breadth opens a mandate-based route into commercially relevant areas like water stress and integrated water resources management, not just water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). The UN's convening power is close to unmatched, spanning 193 countries and more than 80 multilateral forums in 2025, though only three of its coalitions currently include private-sector players, which points to real room for growth. It is an established partner to governments, working with more than 180 countries and drawing over 75% of its funding from Member States. Its governance integrates global and local standards across auditing, due diligence and results-based monitoring in a way few institutions can match. And its dual global and local structure lets a company link a global commitment to local delivery through one network, turning local lessons into change at scale. Translating these strengths into clear, deliverable roles can help partnerships create value for both the UN and its private-sector partners.

Neither side of this partnership is a single, uniform actor. No single UN entity can offer a company everything. What each can credibly offer depends on its own mandate, and the paper sets out ten specific roles across five broader groups.

Collectively, these entities can:

- **Act as an investment enabler**, structuring bankable pipelines and, where mandated, absorbing early-stage risk through guarantees or concessional capital, as the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) does to unlock water investment in fragile and least-developed markets.
- **Act as a system architect**, setting norms and enabling policies that reduce regulatory uncertainty, as UNESCO and FAO do on water governance.

- **Act as a knowledge engine**, providing the data and evidence needed to scale solutions, as FAO's AQUASTAT does across more than 200 countries.
- **Serve as a delivery backbone**, extending implementation reach into the field and building local capabilities that help sustain solutions beyond the initial investment.
- **Act as a coalition champion**, convening otherwise disconnected actors around a shared agenda, as demonstrated at scale by the UN Global Compact's CEO Water Mandate, which brings together more than 600 endorsing companies and supports action across more than 24 critical basins.

The **private sector** is just as varied and complements these capabilities through **four roles** of its own. In this paper, private sector refers to any for-profit, non-state actor, from multinational corporations to individual entrepreneurs and farmers. Entities with partial private ownership are included on that basis. Philanthropic foundations, while not strictly private-sector actors, are included given their established role as co-investors and catalytic funders alongside private capital in development finance.

- **Finance providers** supply commercial or catalytic capital, guarantees, insurance or other risk-sharing instruments to finance, de-risk or scale SDG 6 opportunities.
- **Market enablers** shape demand, standards and market conditions through procurement and supplier requirements, investment criteria, commitments and collective action.
- **Solution providers** contribute technology, data, innovation, research and specialized expertise to address water challenges and improve SDG 6 outcomes.
- **Implementers** translate finance, standards and solutions into delivery by building, operating and maintaining water systems, changing practices across operations and value chains, and supporting last-mile delivery.

Member States complete the model, setting priorities and safeguards, translating them into financeable projects, sharing risk where fiscal space allows, and anchoring partnerships in institutions that outlast any single pilot.

These roles come together in **five recurring partnership archetypes**, each built around a different delivery constraint:

1. **Channeling water finance** uses blended finance and risk transfer to convert an identified need into an investable project. In Tanzania, a \$1 million catalytic investment from UNCDF helped structure East Africa's first sub-national water green bond, raising \$20.8 million and extending access to 26,000 people.
2. **Procuring and delivering solutions** pairs the UN's aggregation and delivery reach with private suppliers, buying and deploying equipment at a scale individual governments or companies could not manage alone.

3. **Shaping market standards** has the UN convene the disclosure and stewardship frameworks that let companies adopt credible practices at scale, rather than each working out its own approach in isolation.
4. **Scaling up innovation** moves proven approaches from assessment to wider adoption, as UNIDO's work with Hiep Phuoc Industrial Park in Viet Nam shows, where 104 resource-efficiency solutions identified through the programme had been implemented by September 2023.
5. **Building shared resilience** convenes companies that share exposure to the same water risk around a common response to protect the basins their operations depend on

Each archetype is repeatable rather than one-off — the same model, adapted to local context, can be applied again elsewhere, which leaves one practical question of where a company should start.

Knowing where to start requires a clearer and more navigable view of which roles are core to the UN system and which are specialized. Three of them, setting norms and standards, enabling policy, and providing data, sit with most UN entities, since they follow directly from existing mandates. The other seven are specialized, held by only a few entities each. For example, UNCDF could lead on finance and viability-gap funding, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on delivery, and UNDP and UNIDO on innovation and capability-building. At the system level, UN-Water can support inter-agency coordination, while the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Water helps elevate water at the highest political level and galvanize partnerships and concerted action. The UN Global Compact and its CEO Water Mandate provide established platforms for engaging and mobilizing private-sector actors. A more detailed mapping of these roles should be developed through wider consultation.

Greater coordination and navigability across the UN system could help private-sector partners identify the entity or combination of entities best placed to respond, based on their respective mandates and comparative advantages. The objective is not to make the UN system operate as a single actor, but to make its complementary capabilities easier for partners to understand and access. The opportunity at the interface between the UN system and the private sector is significant, and the political will to act on it is growing. This is the moment to convert that momentum into results at the scale SDG 6 requires. The building blocks are already in place. What is needed now is to bring them together and turn these frameworks into delivery, starting at the 2026 UN Water Conference. That conference is an opportunity to showcase these collaboration pathways and connect Member States, companies, investors and UN entities around concrete initiatives that accelerate progress on SDG 6.



Introduction

Achieving SDG 6 remains an important global focus. Its scale and complexity, spanning access, infrastructure, financing, climate resilience and governance across every country and context, are too great for governments or the UN system to solve alone. Accelerating water action depends on stronger UN and private sector engagement, drawing on the complementary capabilities the private sector brings, including innovation, technology, investment, operational expertise and market reach. That potential is still largely untapped. Only 9% of Water Action Agenda commitments have originated from the private sector, engagement across the UN system remains fragmented, and there is a clear opportunity for better defined pathways for companies to participate at scale. Projected pressure on UN system resources, including an approximately 25% decline, increases the potential value of complementary private-sector capabilities even further. With only 16% of SDG targets on track globally and progress on SDG 6 insufficient to meet the 2030 deadline, there is a large opportunity for the UN system and private sector to work together to unlock significantly greater impact, mobilizing their combined capital, implementation capabilities and partnerships in service of SDG 6.

UN system-wide coordination on water and sanitation is supported through UN-Water, the UN inter-agency coordination mechanism for water and sanitation. This coordination is guided by the UN System-Wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation and delivered through its Collaborative Implementation Plan. This white paper is intended to directly support all five Priority Collaborative Actions (PCAs) set out in the Collaborative Implementation Plan, specifically through the lens of private sector partnership on SDG 6. On advocacy and agenda-setting (PCA 1.1), the white paper provides consolidated analysis and private sector-tailored messaging to support the UN and the private sector in amplifying their impact on water and sanitation. For the post-2030 agenda

(PCA 1.2), it offers a prioritization framework to assess whether projects are best suited to pre- or post-2030 action. Country programming (PCA 2 and 3) is addressed through a streamlined private sector engagement model operable at both global and country level, including opportunities to advance integrated private sector action across the water-climate-desertification-biodiversity nexus. On data and learning (PCA 4), case studies drawn from UN entities show how the UN can draw on its role as a knowledge provider to partner with the private sector for accelerated SDG 6 delivery, illustrated through case studies drawn from UN entities. And for elevating the ambition of UN Water Conferences (PCA 5), it identifies the 2026 UN Water Conference as a potential forum for sharing and discussing its recommendations. Several UN entities already excel and are highly effective in engaging the private sector for partnerships on SDG 6. This white paper builds on that work, treating those partnerships as evidence of what is possible at greater scale, while positioning its own recommendations as additive to work already under way.

This paper builds the case for private sector engagement on SDG 6 across six sections. Section 1 examines the opportunity to strengthen private sector engagement on SDG 6 and the factors shaping that opportunity today. Section 2 sets out the UN system's distinctive strengths and the rationale for private sector collaboration. Section 3 translates these strengths into practice, identifying potential complementary roles for the UN, the private sector and Member States. Section 4 makes this role-matching concrete through partnership archetypes: real-world examples of how UN and private sector roles combine on the ground. Section 5 consolidates these into a streamlined private sector engagement model for the UN system. Section 6 looks forward, setting out how the UN Water Conference can be used to showcase these roles and launch a timeboxed delivery pathway.



The Opportunity to Strengthen Private Sector Engagement on SDG 6

Progress, gaps, and the potential for deeper private sector partnership

In 2015, UN Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including a dedicated goal on water and sanitation: SDG 6 - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. By establishing SDG 6 as a standalone goal, Member States recognized that water and sanitation are fundamental to human well-being, economic and social development, and environmental sustainability. This also underscores the importance of engaging all actors whose activities depend on or affect water resources, including the private sector, in delivering the goal.

SDG 6 sits at the core of the global water agenda. The goal has eight targets for 2030, measured against eleven indicators that extend well beyond water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to include water quality, efficiency, scarcity, integrated water resources management, ecosystems, finance and participation. With the final delivery window fast approaching, there is a growing gap between the incremental pace of progress on SDG 6 and the faster delivery these targets call for. Current progress is insufficient to meet the 2030 target: based on progress made between 2000 and 2024, projections indicate that by 2030, 3 billion people could remain without a safely managed sanitation service, 2 billion people could remain without a safely managed drinking water service, and 1 billion people could remain without a handwashing facility with soap and water at home ([Exhibit 1](#)).

Five interconnected challenges are constraining SDG 6 progress. Water-related solutions often face insufficient financing, since many projects are high-risk, long-term or lack commercially viable business models. Water regulation, such

as tariffs and efficiency standards, is often inconsistent and fragmented, reducing incentives for investment and implementation. Decision-makers in both the public and private sector may lack the data, technical expertise and market intelligence needed to identify water problems and scale innovative solutions. Even where solutions exist, they may not be delivered at the speed or scale required, or may not reach the markets where they could have the greatest impact. Cross-cutting and underpinning these four challenges is the fact that relevant actors do not always find, understand or work with one another effectively, leaving efforts isolated and limiting opportunities to scale.

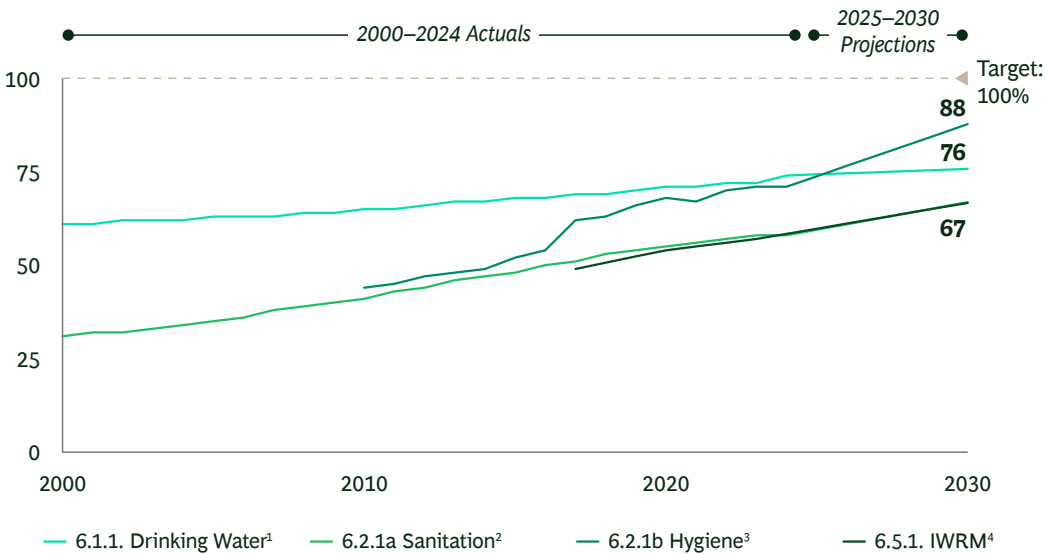
The financing and implementation gaps are especially relevant to the private sector. Available evidence suggests that financing towards SDG 6 remains concentrated and insufficient. SDG 6 funding has largely come from Official Development Assistance (ODA), but this funding is not spread evenly across all SDG 6 indicators. ODA to developing countries remains heavily concentrated on WASH, with indicators 6.1.1 on drinking water and 6.2.1 on sanitation and hygiene accounting for approximately 60% of SDG 6-related ODA flows, and a further 20% supporting community participation in WASH under indicator 6.b.1 ([Exhibit 2](#)). At the same time, these traditional funding sources are projected to decline: global ODA fell by 23% from 2024 to 2025, and UN development system funding by 25% by 2026. These trends suggest that public funding alone is unlikely to close the financing gap and that the UN may need to expand pathways for commercially viable private finance.

EXHIBIT 1

Current SDG 6 progress remains too slow to meet 2030 targets

Progress toward SDG 6 across selected indicators

(% OF WORLD POPULATION WITH ACCESS TO SERVICES, 2000–2030)



3 Bn

People without a safely managed sanitation service⁵

2 Bn

People without a safely managed drinking service⁵

1 Bn

People without a handwashing facility with soap and water at home⁵

Source: UN Water SDG 6 Data Portal; UN Population Division Data Portal.

¹% of the world population using a safely managed drinking system.

²% of the world population using a safely managed sanitation service.

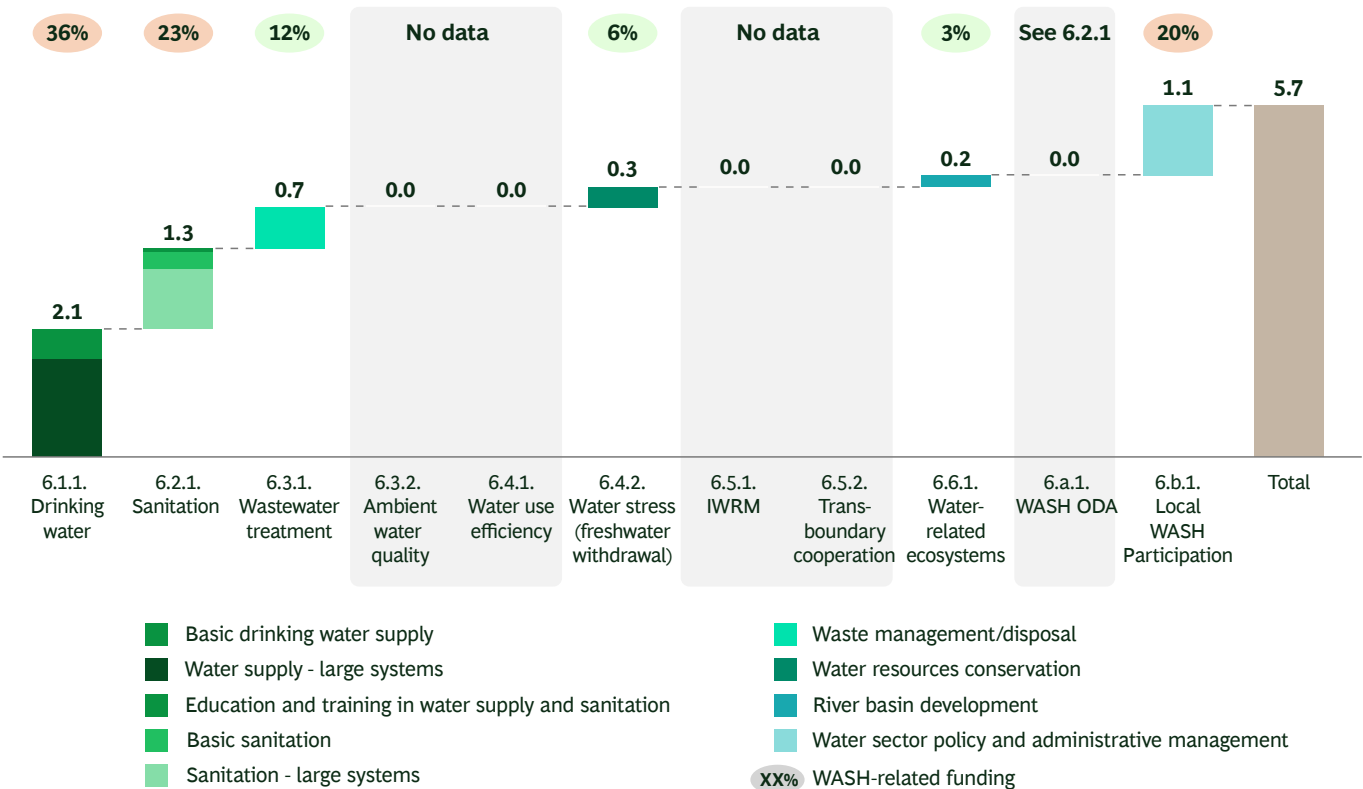
³% of the world population with access to a handwashing facility with soap and water at home.

EXHIBIT 2

Funding is constrained and incomplete, with approximately 80% of ODA going towards WASH

ODA flows to developing countries

USD Bn (2024)



Source: OECD DAC5 database.

The private sector is also well positioned to contribute to SDG 6 progress through its implementation capacity. The UN system has supported significant activity on SDG 6: globally, there are approximately 1,800 registered initiatives related to the goal, the sixth most across the seventeen SDGs. Yet the private sector is largely underrepresented in the implementation effort. Private sector actors have participated in only 13% of registered SDG 6 initiatives, and only 5% of these initiatives are structured as partnerships, underscoring how much room remains to engage the private sector more deliberately in SDG 6 implementation (Exhibit 3). Accelerating progress towards SDG 6 by 2030 is likely to require private sector contributions to both funding and implementation support.

Closing both gaps presents an opportunity for greater engagement between the UN system and the private sector. For UN entities, this could include streamlining the private sector engagement model. Engagement with the private sector can be complex: touchpoints across UN entities are not streamlined,

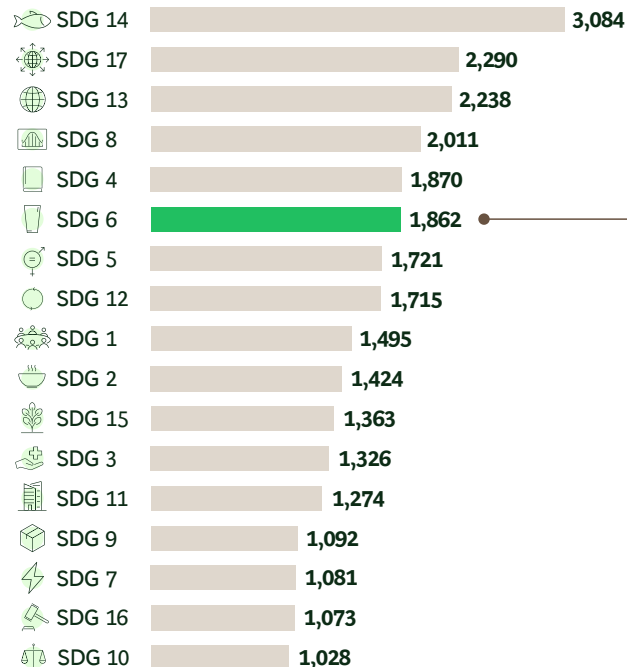
leading multiple agencies to approach the same companies independently; the UN's mandate limits which private sector players it can engage with in the first place; and fragmented, entity-specific due diligence processes may add delays and discourage partnership. Alongside this, the business case for private sector action on SDG 6 could be more clearly defined to help support greater engagement¹. Private sector engagement on SDG 6 is often concentrated in corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting and philanthropy rather than a clearly quantified commercial rationale, which may leave some companies unaware of viable opportunities that would also advance SDG 6 outcomes. Finally, the UN system would benefit from clearly defining and communicating its distinctive strengths and the rationale for collaboration, setting out why companies may choose to engage with the UN system to accelerate SDG 6. Section 2 addresses this by identifying the UN's relevant strengths and explaining how they may position the UN as a potential partner for private sector action on SDG 6.

EXHIBIT 3

Despite high global engagement on SDG 6, private-sector involvement is limited

Globally, there are ~1800 SDG 6 initiatives, the sixth most initiatives across SDGs...

Distribution of all initiatives on the SDG Action Platform by SDG (NUMBER OF INITIATIVES¹)

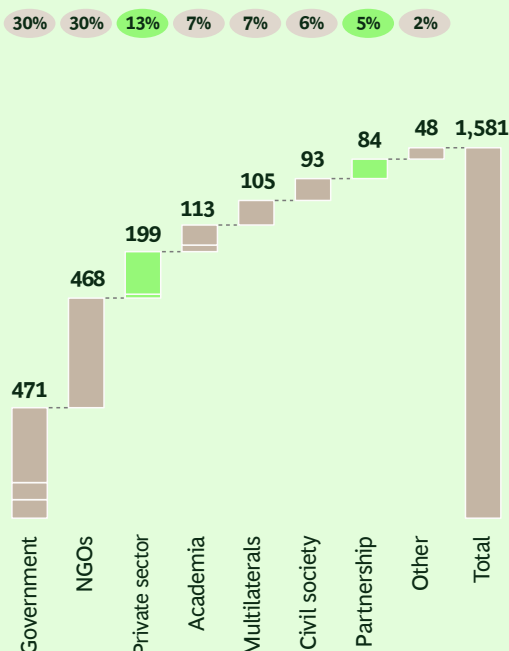


Source: SDG Actions platform.

¹Initiatives are not mutually exclusive.

...but only 13% of SDG 6 initiatives involve the private sector and 5% are partnerships

SDG 6 initiative pledged by entity type (% OF INITIATIVES WHICH INVOLVE EACH ENTITY TYPE)



1. The Water Resilience Report following from this white paper will build the business case for action on water.



Distinctive Strengths

The UN system's role and contributions to SDG 6

Clearly articulating the UN system's strengths where they align with private sector priorities could help streamline private sector engagement and support greater participation towards SDG 6. More than 100 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are currently active on water-related issues, giving the private sector a wide array of potential partners through which to engage on water. Within this landscape, articulating the UN system's potential value to the private sector could help demonstrate how aspects of its structure and mandate may complement those of INGOs and position it as one potential partner in advancing work on SDG 6.

One potential differentiator for the UN lies in the breadth of its coverage across the full SDG 6 spectrum. Many INGOs concentrate their efforts either on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) service delivery, or on water-related conservation. Some focus on the direct delivery of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene through initiatives such as borehole and toilet construction, as well as through water-related emergency response. Others concentrate primarily on water quality and the conservation of water-related ecosystems, working through integrated water resources management and improvements in water-use efficiency.

Across the UN system, the combined mandates of relevant entities span the entire SDG 6 spectrum, though not all engage the private sector in the same way. Some entities, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), focus primarily on setting norms and standards. Others, such as the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), provide the scientific and data foundations on which monitoring and innovation depend. Others, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), shape the policy and regulatory environment that enables private investment. Implementation-focused entities such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) work directly with industry, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), technology providers and investors to deliver measurable transformation on the ground. Water- and sanitation-related work across these entities is coordinated through UN-Water, the UN system's inter-agency coordination mechanism for water and sanitation.

Analysis of these mandates shows that UN entities are well positioned to engage the private sector across all SDG 6 indicators, as each indicator has at least one custodian entity allocated to it. This may enable UN entities to partner with the private sector on commercially viable opportunities in areas such as wastewater treatment, water stress and integrated water resources management². Beyond the breadth of its SDG 6 coverage, the UN has six further characteristics that may strengthen its distinctive contribution to the private sector. Within the selected benchmark, the UN was assessed more favorably on five of these six dimensions. See [Appendix A](#) for a more detailed overview of the benchmarking exercise.

The first is the UN's global standing and convening capacity. The UN's intergovernmental mandate, established systems and role in the global SDG 6 agenda can support credibility among partners. Its multilateral mandate can position it to act as a convener across diverse stakeholder groups, creating opportunities for private sector participation in multi-stakeholder dialogue. This convening strength is complemented by a distinct set of implementation-focused entities such as UNIDO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) or the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), who work directly with the private-sector to improve industrial water management, demonstrate new technologies, build local markets and mobilize investment, translating dialogue into delivery on the ground. Together, these capabilities allow the UN not only to convene stakeholders, but also to translate agreements into financed, operational delivery. Within the selected benchmark, the UN had a broader reported geographic footprint than the comparator organizations, spanning 193 countries, and hosted more than 80 multilateral forums in 2025. This is, however, the one dimension on which the UN's current private sector engagement appears more limited: only three of its partner coalitions include private sector players, indicating room to grow this aspect of its engagement. By convening governments, companies, financiers and communities around shared priorities, the UN can create the legitimacy and collective ownership needed to move from fragmented initiatives to coordinated action, a scale and standing of convening that single-country or regional INGOs are not typically positioned to replicate. The second differentiator is the UN's role as an established partner for governments. The UN maintains relationships with national governments through the technical assistance it provides and can function as a matchmaker and interlocutor between the public and private sectors, enabling

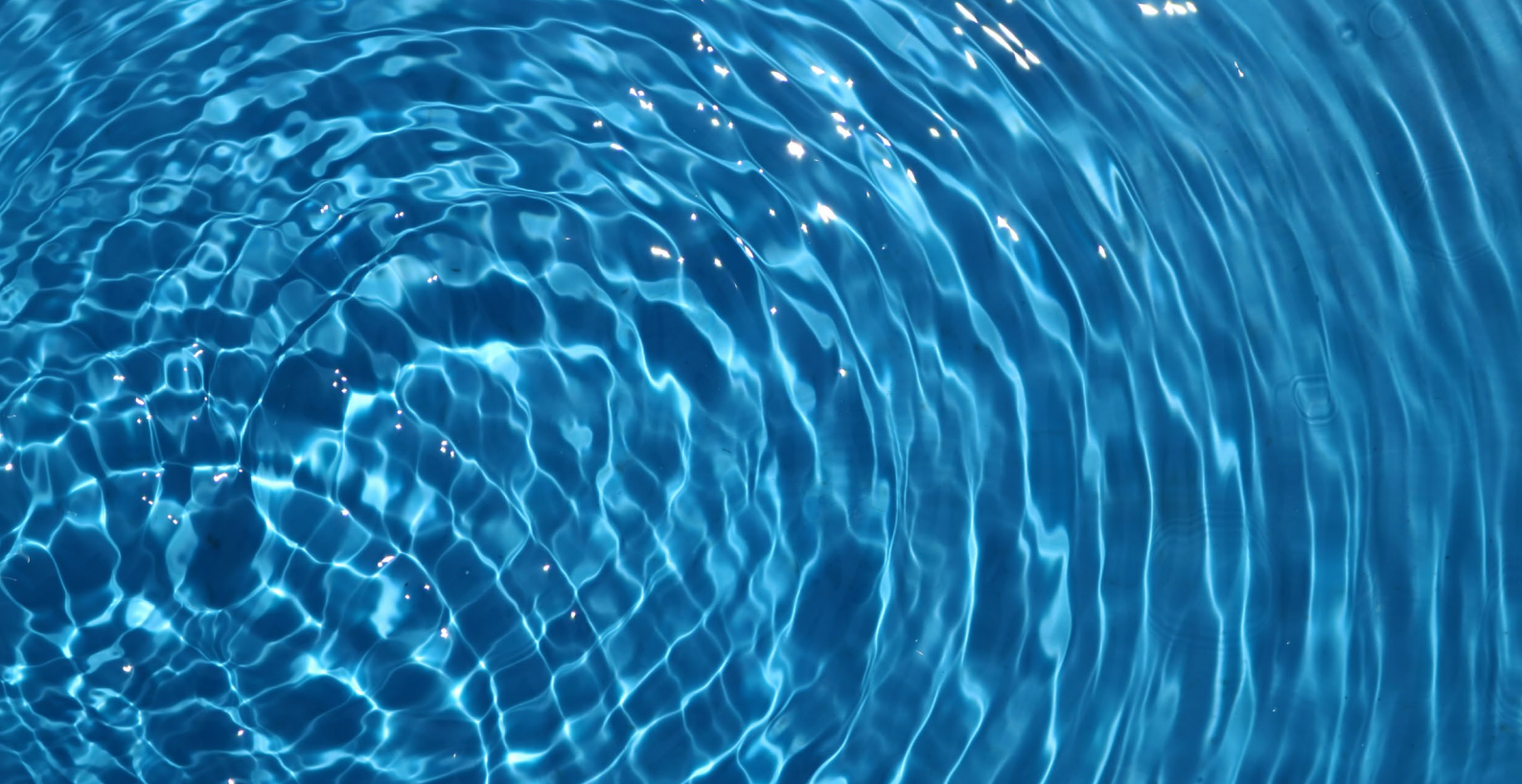
private sector actors to help meet identified government needs. In contrast to INGOs, the UN's status as an intergovernmental body is an important feature: it works with more than 180 governments worldwide and receives more than 75% of its funding from Member States. This intergovernmental character represents a notable point of differentiation from INGOs. For the private sector, these long-standing government relationships can provide a credible route into national policy dialogue and regulatory processes, helping align proposed initiatives with public priorities in ways that short-term advisory or programme-based relationships may not.

The third differentiator concerns the UN's governance systems. The transparency of the UN's operations, together with its established standards for financial reporting, impact evaluation and safeguards against greenwashing, may reinforce its global standing and help manage partnership risks. Within the selected benchmark, the UN was assessed as maintaining governance systems that apply both local and global standards and checks across auditing, project due diligence, transparency and results-based monitoring. Some comparator INGOs were assessed as relying more heavily on local checks with global sign-off, rather than maintaining fully integrated global and local governance systems. This is a level of independently governed oversight that few organizations, public or private, are able to match. In complex or high-profile engagements, the UN's integrated safeguards, due-diligence processes and accountability systems provide assurance against reputational, financial and greenwashing risk. The fourth differentiator is the UN's data and knowledge base. A wide range of data sources, knowledge products and tools is available for private sector use across SDG 6 issues, providing a potentially useful evidence base to inform private sector decision-making on water. A potential strength is the breadth and depth of this information base. Within the selected benchmark, UN entities maintain a comparatively large set of open-source databases, with more than 20 across its member entities. However, collective publications by UN entities totalled 9 reports in 2025, compared with 40 published by a benchmarked INGO over the same period. This may limit the UN's ability to translate its expertise and insights into digestible formats for private sector audiences. The value for companies lies in access to authoritative, internationally recognized evidence that can strengthen operational, investment and risk-management decisions, with an opportunity to increase its usefulness through greater translation into decision-ready formats.

2. Water stress is a particularly relevant entry point for private sector engagement, given that companies face real supply chain disruption risk from the over-extraction of fresh water. Integrated water resources management, in turn, enables basin-level water planning in coordination with other water stakeholders, offering the private sector a mechanism for supply chain protection.

The fifth differentiator is the UN's dual global and local structure, which is well suited to action on water in partnership with different types of private sector players. The UN operates at a global level through coordination among its member agencies, and at a local level through its country teams. This dual structure can support work on both highly localized water issues, such as WASH service delivery, and transboundary water issues, such as integrated water resources management across national boundaries. It also means the UN can engage the private sector at both levels: for example, by delivering local solutions in partnership with local small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs), and by working with multinational corporations to protect shared water basins and key supply chains. A further characteristic is the dual nature of the UN systems' leadership structure. In the selected benchmark, comparator INGOs generally set strategy, standards, fundraising and knowledge development at the global level, with local delivery teams accountable to global headquarters, while UN entities maintain dual accountability: to Member States, representing local governments, and to global UN agencies simultaneously. This combined footprint allows companies to link global commitments with locally appropriate implementation through one institutional network, reducing the need for separate global advisers and local delivery partners in each market while enabling lessons and consistent approaches to be carried across markets. The sixth and final

differentiator is the UN's potential to support sustainable impact at scale. The UN system may help amplify the scale of impact by applying good practice globally, reducing fragmentation across local water initiatives, and supporting the longer-term sustainability of projects. For the private sector, this means engagement with the UN may offer potential for wider impact, not only through the direct outcomes of a given project, but through the insights it generates, which can then be applied across other projects globally. Within the selected benchmark, UN entities were assessed as having access to substantial resources, maintaining a wide operational reach that extends into conflict-affected settings, and undertaking work aimed at global and systemic change alongside localized action. Together, these differentiators suggest why the UN may be well positioned to engage the private sector on SDG 6. Section 3 sets out how this engagement can happen by defining complementary roles for each of the key stakeholders. For private-sector partners, the result can extend beyond a single project. Successful approaches may be embedded in national systems, replicated across geographies and sustained beyond an individual funding or implementation cycle to deliver lasting impact.



Partnership Roles

Complementary UN and private sector roles to strengthen SDG 6 action with Member State support

To support effective SDG 6 action, the private sector and the UN can collaborate with Member States to close the gaps identified in Section 1: insufficient financing, fragmented standards and regulation, underused data, knowledge and solutions, implementation gaps and a lack of co-ordination. The roles set out below are intended to address each of these problems in turn. This section defines concrete, complementary and combinable roles for each of these three stakeholder groups.

UN Partnership Roles

Where financing is scarce, the UN can act as an investment enabler. Where regulation is fragmented, it can act as a system architect. Where data and technical expertise are limited, it can act as a knowledge engine. Where solutions exist but do not scale, it can act as a delivery backbone. And where the relevant actors are not finding one another, the UN can act as a coalition champion. It is important to note that no single UN entity is expected to perform all role groups but rather, each entity's institutional mandate and comparative advantage determine what it can credibly offer. Private sector partners can engage each entity accordingly, seeking out the role groups its mandate and capability actually support. Together these roles give the UN system a part to play across a broad range of constraints slowing SDG 6 progress.

The investment enabler group can help the UN convert identified water needs into opportunities that public, concessional and commercial financiers can assess. As a finance and pipeline mobilizer, it prepares and packages projects into credible investment pipelines, addressing a recurring problem: viable needs often exist without projects structured well enough to attract capital. Where affordability or risk barriers block a project from proceeding on fully commercial terms, the UN can instead step in as a viability-gap funder, deploying concessional loans, first-loss capital or guarantees to take a catalytic position that may make a senior lender's participation more viable in fragile markets. UNCDF demonstrates the breadth of this role. Its mandate enables it to deploy catalytic financial instruments in least-developed countries (LDCs) and fragile markets, work directly with municipalities and SMEs, and mobilize domestic, multilateral development bank (MDB) and private capital. Its long track record and experience also shows that the principal constraint is often not a lack of demand or available capital, but weak project structuring and inappropriate risk allocation.

Fragmented regulation is a second constraint the UN is well placed to address as a system architect, establishing the rules and institutional conditions for responsible private sector participation. As a norms and standards setter, it develops principles, benchmarks and disclosure frameworks that can create a common basis for measuring water performance and help reduce greenwashing risk. Governments can also draw on the UN as a policy and systems enabler to reform water rights, tariffs, permitting and governance, potentially giving private actors greater certainty without the UN directly providing finance. UNESCO's intergovernmental science-policy platforms and FAO's work on water governance and natural-resource rights illustrate this contribution. Both can translate technical knowledge into frameworks that Member States recognize and private actors can use and also demonstrate that policy, governance and clarified rights can de-risk private participation just as materially as financial instruments.

A third constraint, the lack of data and technical expertise available to decision-makers, is where the UN operates as a knowledge engine, providing an independent evidence base that may complement private sector analysis. As a data and evidence provider, it generates or consolidates information on water availability, quality and stress that firms may integrate into their own risk models. UN entities can also act as innovation catalysts, helping water solutions move from concept to wider adoption by testing performance in real conditions and helping reduce adoption risk for public buyers. FAO's AQUASTAT database illustrates this role, providing water resource and use data across more than 200 countries that companies draw on to assess supply risk and inform site selection and investment decisions. Strong solutions can still fail to reach the markets that need them most, a fourth constraint the delivery backbone role is intended to address by connecting global resources and private sector capabilities with country-level implementation. As a delivery and

implementation partner, the UN supports procurement and coordination where mandates permit, aggregating demand and providing reach where commercial channels alone may be insufficient. Strengthening the ability of governments, utilities and SMEs to design, operate and maintain water solutions is instead the work of a capability builder and technical adviser, supporting longer-term sustainability once the infrastructure itself is in place.

A fifth constraint cuts across the other four: relevant actors may not find, understand or trust each other enough to collaborate. This is the gap the coalition champion role is intended to address. Bringing governments, companies and financiers together around a defined challenge as a neutral or broadly recognized convener and matchmaker can provide otherwise disconnected or competing actors with a forum in which to work. As an agenda-setter and issue champion, the UN can also raise the visibility of water priorities and sustain momentum beyond individual events. The UN Global Compact's CEO Water Mandate and Water Resilience Coalition demonstrate the potential scale of business leadership on water. Together, they bring together more than 600 companies endorsing the CEO Water Mandate, 52 member companies in the Water Resilience Coalition with a combined market capitalization of over \$12 trillion, collective action underway in more than 24 critical basins, and over \$500 million mobilized with partners for water stewardship projects.

Which of these roles leads in a given partnership depends on the country, the water challenge and the stage the partnership has reached. A role that is central at the outset can just as easily become supporting once implementation begins. Section 2 set out why the UN is positioned to offer this range of contributions. The five role groups are how that position becomes practical, as the following case illustrates.

Building Water Efficiency and Investment Readiness in Lebanese SMEs

UNIDO's work with SONACO, a Lebanese food manufacturer, illustrates how a UN entity can combine technical assistance with investment enablement. Through the European Union (EU)-funded 2Circular programme, UNIDO applied its Transfer of Environmentally Sound Technology methodology to identify water, energy and material efficiency measures. It then developed "bankable notes" setting out the cost, expected savings and payback period of each measure, and connected the resulting opportunities to green financing programmes.

UNIDO therefore combined two practical roles. As a capability builder and technical adviser, it identified efficiency measures and transferred the methods required to implement them. As a finance and pipeline mobilizer, it converted those measures into investment-ready business cases that could be assessed by financiers. The assessment identified the potential to reduce SONACO's annual water use by 28%, recover five tonnes of waste from wastewater each year, and generate approximately US\$172,800 in annual savings across water, energy and materials. The case illustrates how the UN can connect technical improvement with finance, rather than providing either in isolation.

Private Sector Partnership Roles

The private sector³ comprises a diverse set of actors with different incentives, capabilities and points of entry into SDG 6, and its contribution extends well beyond funding. Across this range of actors, the nature of their contribution varies as much as the actors themselves. It can be a commercial lender considering infrastructure finance, a technology company developing a monitoring platform, or a corporate buyer setting supplier requirements, none of which will engage in the same way or offer the same contribution. These contributions are grouped into four roles, describing the principal ways private actors engage with the UN system on SDG 6. These roles describe what an actor does in a given engagement, not a fixed category of organization, and the same company can occupy different roles in different partnerships, regardless of its sector, size or primary source of financing. They are combinable and complement, rather than replace, public responsibility.

Section 1 identified the finance gap as a key area which the private sector is well positioned to address. As a finance provider, a private actor supplies commercial loans, infrastructure finance, insurance, guarantees or catalytic capital to develop, deliver or scale an SDG 6 opportunity. Its willingness to participate depends on project preparation, credible revenue mechanisms and appropriate risk allocation, often pre-shaped by public, concessional or UN support.

Not every contribution is financial, however. A private actor can also work as a market enabler, using its influence to shape demand, standards and market conditions, whether as a corporate buyer requiring suppliers to meet water-efficiency standards, an investor group weighing water performance in capital allocation, or a coalition coordinating companies around a shared basin risk. This role may be particularly relevant where the constraint is not capital or technology, but the absence of market conditions that make improved water performance expected and rewarded.

Where the gap is technical rather than financial or regulatory, a private actor can instead act as a solution provider, contributing technology, data, research or specialized expertise, from treatment and reuse systems to AI, remote sensing and risk analytics. Its contribution may be most relevant where the constraint is not the existence of a solution, but the government access or independent validation needed to bring it to bear. Xylem's partnership with UNICEF illustrates this role in practice.

These contributions may not translate into impact without an implementer to carry them out. Building, operating and maintaining infrastructure, or supporting last-mile delivery through utilities, off-grid models and supply chains, an implementer translates finance, standards or solutions into operational change. Its role may be particularly important where the constraint is not the availability of a solution, but the capability and operating model required to deliver and sustain it.

Member State Roles

Member States remain the primary duty-bearers for the human rights to water and sanitation. Their role establishes the conditions in which UN and private sector collaboration can align with national priorities and support sustainable outcomes, and how much direct involvement a partnership needs varies by type. It may be greatest where a partnership depends on public procurement, tariffs, regulation or essential services, and may be more limited for early-stage technology or voluntary-standard partnerships.

Member States can contribute in several ways. Setting national priorities, tariffs, permitting and safeguards helps provide clarity for UN entities and private partners to act within a clear public mandate. Member States can also contribute to translating national priorities into projects that partners can assess, finance and deliver, including through relevant data, feasibility work, approvals and delivery models. Where appropriate to the local context and fiscal conditions, Member State participation may include mechanisms such as co-funding, guarantees, subsidies or availability payments that complement other sources of finance and share risks across partners. Partnerships may also benefit from links with institutions responsible for long-term delivery, such as ministries, municipalities, utilities or regulators, which can support continuity beyond initial pilots or funding cycles.

The resulting model is complementary. Member States provide public direction, enabling conditions and accountability. The UN contributes trust, coordination, standards, data and delivery reach. Private actors contribute capital, innovation, market influence and implementation capacity. Together, these roles provide a practical basis for partnership, one that Section 4 puts into action through real-world archetypes.

3. In this paper, private sector refers to any for-profit, non-state actor, from multinational corporations to individual entrepreneurs and farmers. Entities with partial private ownership are included on that basis. Philanthropic foundations, while not strictly private sector actors, are included given their established role as co-investors and catalytic funders alongside private capital in development finance.

Contributing Technical Expertise to Climate-Resilient WASH (Xylem & UNICEF)

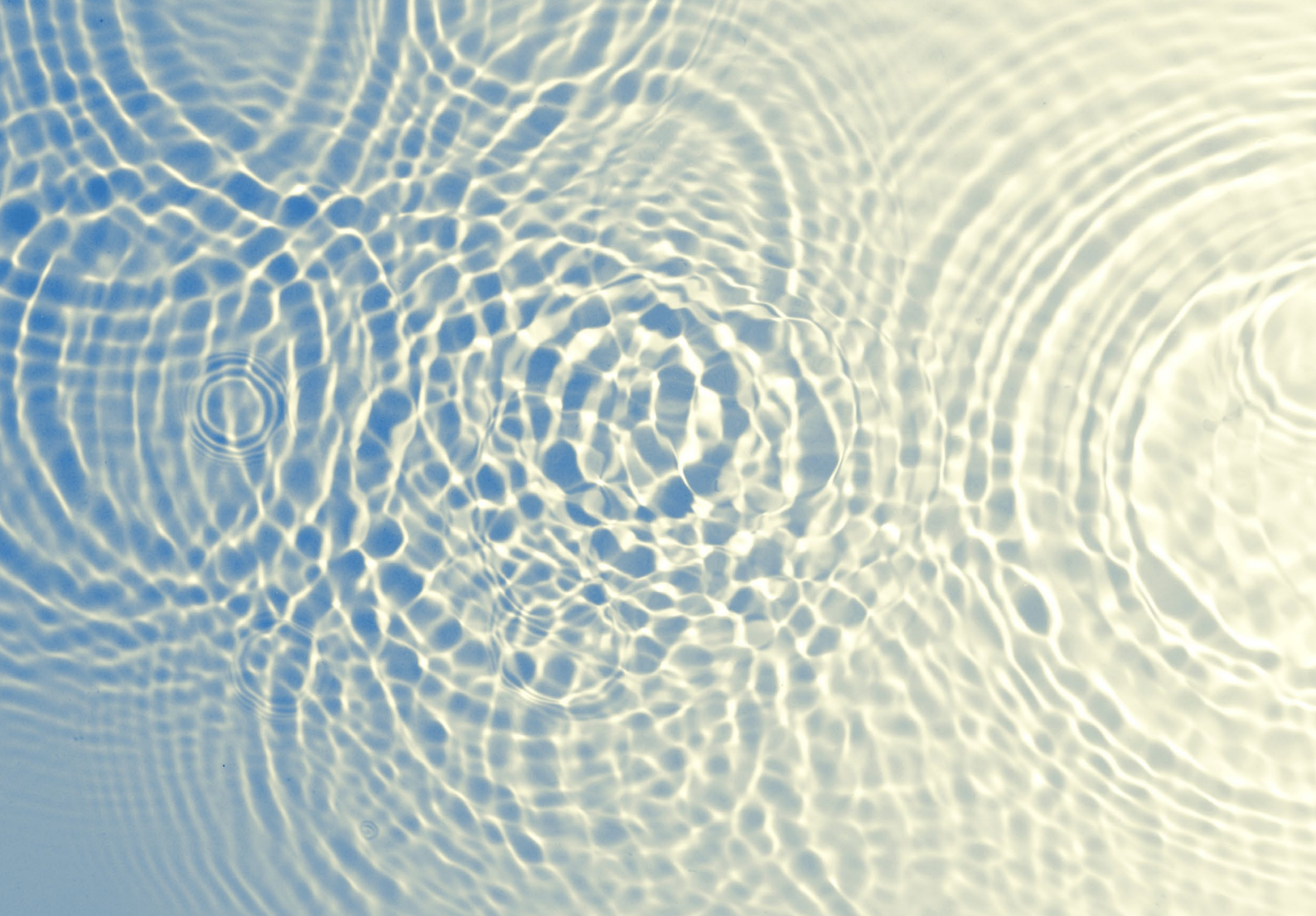
- By acting as a solution provider, a private-sector partner can contribute specialized technology, expertise and innovation to complement the UN's programme reach, government relationships and capacity-building capabilities. The Xylem-UNICEF partnership illustrates how these complementary roles can support more resilient water and sanitation services in vulnerable communities.

Xylem and UNICEF's partnership began in 2020, when Xylem supported UNICEF's global COVID-19 relief effort, reaching more than 3.3 million people with hygiene messaging and providing over 117,000 people with critical WASH supplies. In 2021, building on this, Xylem signed a three-year partnership agreement with UNICEF supporting its WASH in Schools programme across 15 Indian states and 192 districts, in a country where water poverty is especially acute among rural communities and pre-school children, one in three of whom lack access to a basic water service. The programme, delivered in partnership with the Indian government, targeted more than 45,000 schools and pre-schools, aiming to benefit more than 3 million children through improved facilities, gender-sensitive WASH provision and pre-school WASH standards.

Following this programme's success, Xylem and UNICEF signed a five-year collaboration agreement in 2023 to support refugees, internally displaced persons and host communities across Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda affected by climate-driven flooding and drought, through which Xylem provides financial, technical, advocacy and in-kind support to UNICEF's work. Xylem specialists work with UNICEF WASH teams on climate-resilient approaches including solarization of borehole pumping, non-revenue water prevention and aquifer recharge, alongside hands-on training for local utility staff and government engagement to embed WASH standards.

In this partnership, Xylem acts primarily as a solution provider, contributing technical expertise and resources, while UNICEF acts as a delivery backbone, including through its capability-building and technical-advisory role. Reported outcomes include a lower cost of capital, as the UNICEF partnership strengthens Xylem's ESG positioning; enhanced brand recognition, including ranking #6 on Barron's 2025 list of the 100 Most Sustainable U.S. Companies, up from #15 the year before; and brand credibility associated with the five-year, formal UNICEF partnership.





Partnership Archetypes

Partnership models with global case studies

The complementary roles described in Section 3 become actionable when they are organized around a shared objective. The five archetypes below provide repeatable partnership models for combining UN and private-sector contributions to accelerate SDG 6 delivery. Each pairs a distinct UN contribution with a private-sector counterpart and a set of practical pathways to address a recurring SDG 6 delivery constraint. The archetypes provide a common structure that can be adapted to country context as needed. Collectively, the archetypes address five recurring delivery needs: making projects investable, connecting solutions with demand, establishing credible standards and enabling conditions, moving innovations from pilot to adoption, and coordinating action where water risks are shared.

Channeling water finance uses blended finance and risk transfer to convert identified water needs into investable opportunities. The UN may act as investment enabler by supporting project preparation, structuring a credible pipeline

and, where mandates allow, absorbing early-stage or viability risk through catalytic instruments. Private finance providers contribute capital and financial expertise once the opportunity reaches an acceptable risk-return profile, while Member States provide ownership, approvals and, where appropriate, co-financing. The archetype is activated through four linked pathways: bankable project pipeline development, mobilization of philanthropic or concessional capital, guarantees and other risk-sharing instruments, and commercial finance mobilization. Together, these pathways can improve affordability and the viability of water projects without requiring private actors to carry risks they cannot reasonably absorb. Pipeline development creates an investable proposition, catalytic capital and guarantees address viability and early-stage risk, and commercial finance provides scale. Where essential services cannot reach ordinary commercial terms, transparent public support can provide an additional pathway to support project viability and affordability.

Unlocking Water Investment through Blended Finance (Tanga UWASA & UNCDF)

Tanga Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Tanga UWASA) in Tanzania needed long-term financing to expand treatment capacity, rehabilitate distribution networks and invest in climate-resilient infrastructure. UNCDF provided \$1 million in catalytic funding, together with transaction structuring, investor engagement and technical assistance, converting the utility's investment programme into East Africa's first sub-national water green bond. The \$20.8 million

issuance attracted strong investor confidence, with 65 percent purchased by domestic institutional investors despite carrying no sovereign guarantee. It is expected to extend clean water access to 26,000 people for the first time. UNCDF's role was investment enabler; the investors were finance providers and the utility itself was implementer. UNCDF's current pipeline represents an estimated US\$360 million in potential future financing for water investments.

Note: Additional archetype case studies can be found in Appendix B.

Procuring and delivering solutions pairs the UN as delivery backbone with private solution providers and implementers. It is most relevant where demand is fragmented, suppliers lack a viable route to market, or local institutions need support to operate and maintain water solutions. The archetype depends on demand aggregation and procurement, supplier and SME capacity development, deployment of infrastructure, digital tools or technical services, and local operations and maintenance capability. Member States define needs and anchor service continuity. The UN contribution can extend beyond purchasing to specifying requirements, validating suppliers, aggregating demand, facilitating local partnerships and strengthening delivery capability. Private actors then translate these opportunities into implementation by deploying solutions, supporting last-mile delivery, and remaining responsible for quality, operations and long-term performance. UNICEF's procurement and supply-chain model illustrates how UN channels can connect qualified suppliers with programmes and markets that may be difficult to reach through ordinary commercial routes. UNICEF procures essential supplies and services, including WASH products such as water pumps for its own programmes and on behalf of eligible partners. Its role extends from product selection and strategic procurement through logistics and last-mile delivery, while also strengthening national and local supply systems to support sustainable access over time. See [Appendix B](#) for the full case.

Shaping market standards and policy can involve the UN convening governments, companies and technical institutions around common standards, disclosure approaches and voluntary commitments that can support improved water performance across sectors and supply chains. Pre-2030, potential pathways include those that can be activated quickly, such as corporate water-risk disclosure, supplier water-use requirements, procurement standards and corporate water stewardship. Over time, the evidence and practices generated through these pathways could provide useful inputs into broader policy and regulatory reform. Member States would retain responsibility for translating these approaches into national policy and regulation, with UN entities providing evidence, technical support and convening as appropriate. These issues may remain relevant to the post-2030 water agenda as emerging technologies and economic activities create new demands, including the water implications of artificial intelligence (AI) and data infrastructure, alongside wider issues of water allocation, efficiency, reuse, pollution and corporate accountability. The Coca-Cola Company's adoption of the CEO Water Mandate's Contextual Water Targets Guidance illustrates this pathway in practice. It translates the framework into water-related risk assessments across several hundred locations, identifying which sites carry the greatest sourcing and operational risk so that stewardship investment can be targeted where it matters most. The full example appears in [Appendix B](#).

Scaling up innovation requires promising water solutions to be tested, adapted, independently validated and incubated before wider adoption. This archetype pairs the UN as knowledge engine with private solution providers, combining technical expertise, knowledge of local conditions and institutional access with private-sector technology, data and specialized capabilities. Co-development establishes relevance, piloting and validation build confidence, and incubation and market-entry support connect proven solutions with buyers and delivery partners. Incubation may include technical assistance, business-model refinement, local partnerships, preparation for procurement or investment and capability building where the UN transfers the skills operators need to run, adapt or maintain a solution without ongoing external support. This can help proven solutions move beyond isolated pilots and establish the operational, commercial and institutional readiness required for wider adoption. AI-enabled monitoring and analytics may also form part of this process where appropriate safeguards are in place. Hiep Phuoc Industrial Park illustrates the archetype in practice. Through UNIDO's Global Eco-Industrial Parks Programme, resource-efficiency opportunities were assessed across 31 tenant companies, with technical support provided to move identified solutions from assessment into implementation. By September 2023, 104 solutions had been implemented and a further 68 were planned. See [Appendix B](#) for the full case. This process helps ensure that wider scale-up and deployment is reserved for solutions that demonstrate sufficient performance, safety and readiness.

Building shared resilience uses collective action on defined geographies, with the UN acting as coalition champion and private actors contributing as market enablers, solution providers or implementers. The UN can convene organizations exposed to the same basin, watershed, city or supplier geography and align them with shared water resilience priorities

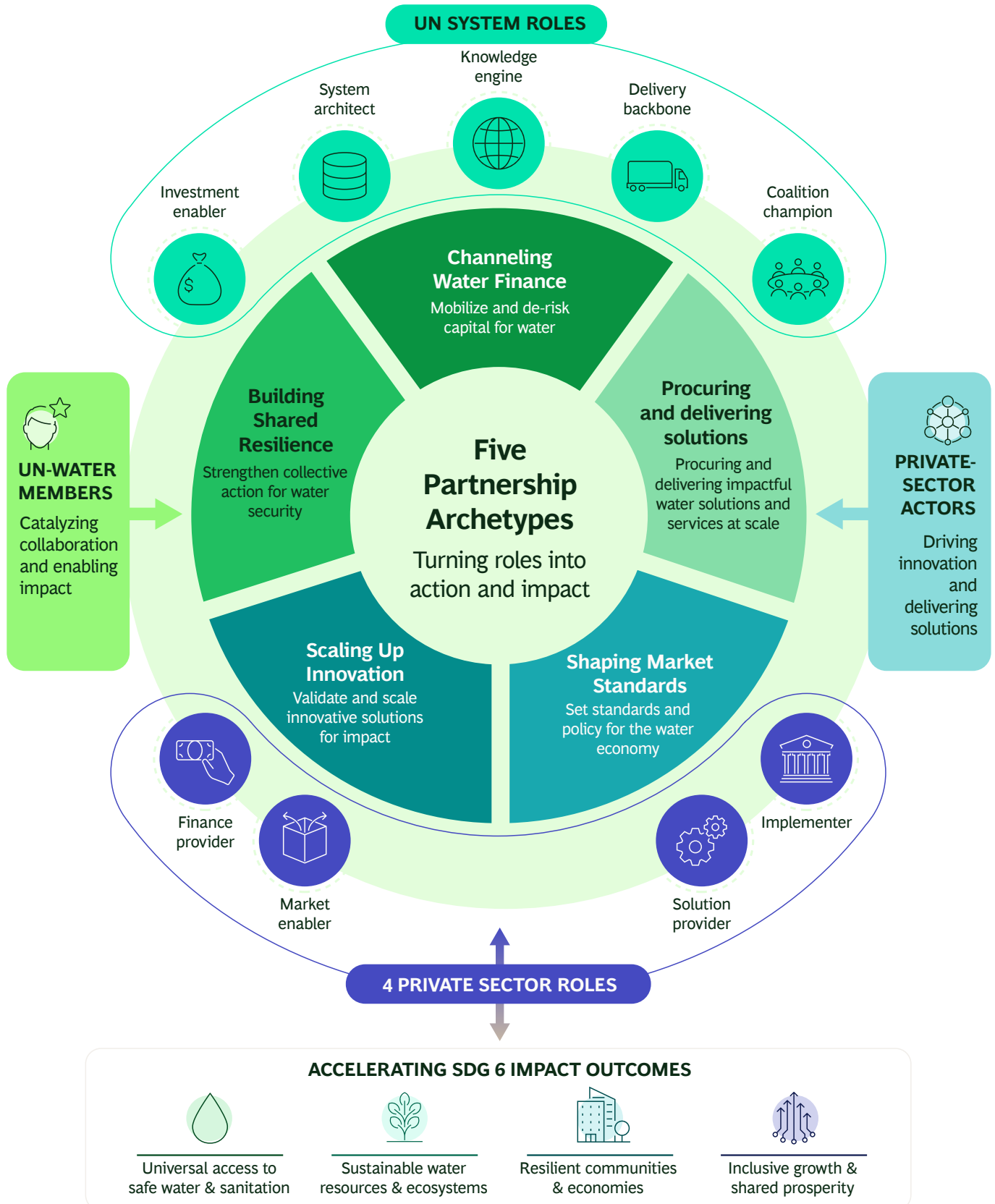
that protect supply chains and strengthen the adaptation efforts of local communities. The pathways to actioning this archetype include joint risk assessment, coordinated crisis response, supply-chain resilience planning and collective basin action. Member States connect the partnership to basin institutions and national plans. The archetype can combine immediate crisis-response arrangements with pre-crisis action, supported by pooled funding, to strengthen supply chains, ecosystems and local water systems. Private-sector participation is strongest where companies share exposure to the water risk and can contribute assets, data, finance or implementation capacity in support of an identified public need. At the 2023 UN Water Conference the UN Global Compact CEO Water Mandate along with a coalition of partners began mobilizing collective action across 100 Priority Basins to advance SDG 6 while reducing private sector water risk. The Women + Water Collaborative illustrates the archetype in practice. Through the Water Resilience Coalition, Gap Inc., Cargill and GSK, now joined by seven further corporate and foundation partners, worked with WaterAid around shared goals, metrics and governance across multiple Indian river basins, supporting water replenishment, WASH and agricultural water efficiency. See [Appendix B](#) for further details.

Together, the archetypes provide a practical structure for clarifying roles and identifying the pathways and partners required for delivery. A single UN entity or private-sector actor may contribute through more than one role across or within different archetypes. The practical next step is to assess the opportunity, define the pathway mix and determine which UN entity is best placed to lead or support the engagement. Section 5 will discuss entry points for the private-sector providing a common basis for identifying the appropriate partners.

Complementary UN and private-sector roles activate five partnership archetypes to accelerate SDG 6 progress

UNITING ROLES. ACTIVATING PARTNERSHIPS. ACCELERATING SDG 6 IMPACT.

Complementary roles and shared pathways to deliver water resilience for people and the planet.





Private Sector Entry Points

Setting up for successful private sector engagement

Sections 3 and 4 defined the roles which the UN and private sector can each play on SDG 6 and showed, through real-world case studies, how those roles combine in practice. This section suggests entry points for the private sector to engage with UN entities based on demonstrated capabilities.

A recurring inhibitor to partnerships, as identified in Section 1, is that private sector engagement is overly complex. This complexity runs in both directions - where the UN initiates a partnership, more than one UN entity may approach the same private sector actor independently, without visibility into parallel efforts elsewhere in the system. Where the private sector initiates a partnership, it can struggle to identify the right UN entity to approach, particularly where it lacks visibility into the specialized mandates and capabilities of individual UN entities. An important starting point for UN-private sector partnerships is a clear mapping of relevant UN entities' core competencies and areas of specialization with regards to their private sector engagement. This is a complex and extensive exercise that could benefit from significant consultation with both UN and private sector stakeholders. This section aims to provide a starting point for that work, giving examples of UN entities' specializations and capabilities at a high level, to give private sector a better view of the UN system and which UN entities to engage, on SDG 6. Just as "the private sector" is itself an umbrella term spanning very different actors, such as utilities, investors, industrial water users, agricultural water users, technology providers and solution providers, that engage on SDG 6 in different ways, "the UN system" is likewise composed of entities with distinct mandates and functions. Segmenting both sides of the partnership, rather than treating either as a single actor, is what allows the right UN entity to be matched to the right private sector actor. A more in-depth mapping can be taken forward across the UN system, with coordination through UN-Water as appropriate.

In practice, many UN entities are capable of playing most of the roles defined in Section 3 to some degree. However, sustained and impactful partnerships depend on directing private sector actors toward the agency best placed to hold a given role, based on their mandates, capacity, capabilities and geographical reach. To make this practical, each role is classified as either specialized or core. Specialized roles are held by one or a small number of UN entities, reflecting a distinct mandate or capability; core roles are held by most or all members. The intention is not to allocate all relevant work exclusively to any single UN agency, but to give the private sector a starting point for engagement⁴.

Seven of the ten roles are specialized.

The finance and pipeline mobilizer and viability-gap funder roles require UN entities to be mandated to derisk private investment in water and to have the capabilities to channel finance to a pipeline of commercially viable water projects. UNCDF is a good example of a UN entity which could play this role, given its mandate to provide guarantees and first-loss instruments to unlock private and public capital where risk is high, and its existing practice of consolidating pipeline information from across the UN system. UNCDF can absorb early-stage or policy risk on water projects that are impactful but not yet commercially financeable, in a way other UN entities are not structured or mandated to do.

4. Where a request falls outside an agency's specific competencies, that agency can in turn direct the private sector actor toward a more relevant UN-Water member based on capacity, mandate and areas of expertise.

The innovation catalyst role is best played by UN entities which can provide testbeds for new water solutions and support scaling them into new markets. The role requires a strong connection with the private sector in order to source these solutions and partner with the private sector in developing them. For example, UNDP and UNIDO have existing interfaces with the private sector on innovation: UNDP identifies and tests locally sourced solutions through its Accelerator Labs, while its Digital, AI and Innovation Hub works with governments, innovators and private-sector partners to pilot and scale digital solutions. UNIDO meanwhile, accelerates industrial innovation, cleaner production and industrial water reuse, delivered through technology demonstration and enterprise upgrading across industrial ecosystems.

The delivery and implementation partner role, by contrast, requires the UN entity to have an extensive on-the-ground footprint via country teams, to support the deployment of water solutions to those who need them most. UNICEF is an example of a UN entity well-suited to play this role, given its WASH implementation capacity, reach across more than 190 countries spanning rural and urban contexts, coordinating capacity in emergency settings, and established relationships with both public and private partners.

Capacity building and technical advisory work is undertaken by most UN entities however, UNIDO and UNDP have demonstrated strong capabilities with respect to this role and private sector engagement. UNIDO works directly with companies to identify resource efficiency opportunities and implement cleaner production measures, while embedding industrial water efficiency into national industrial development plans. UNDP complements this by strengthening institutional capacity to translate Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and National Adaptation Plan (NAP) priorities, including water-related priorities, into coordinated policies, finance strategies, monitoring frameworks and more investable implementation plans, creating clearer enabling conditions for private-sector action. The UN Global Compact contributes to this work in a different way, supporting the implementation of water stewardship frameworks, basin-level collective action models and co-benefit accounting methodologies, even though it does not itself play a direct technical advisory role.

The trusted convener and matchmaker role requires strong coordination capacity across both the UN system and private sector partners working on water. UN-Water is an example of a coordinating mechanism which plays this role at a system level, since it coordinates more than 30 UN entities and over 40 partners on water, helping promote coherence, information sharing and communication. The UN Global Compact shows how this can be done with private sector partners. It brings the

necessary matchmaking capacity this role requires, principally through the CEO Water Mandate, which brings together business leaders, UN agencies and governments to advance corporate water stewardship. This convening occurs both at the global level around shaping and driving uptake of normative best practices, and also at the regional and local level, convening actors within water stress basins to act collectively towards shared contextual goals and mobilize a critical mass of industrial water users to build basin resiliency.

A similar requirement applies to the **agenda-setter and issue champion role**, which needs the appropriate status and mandate to prioritize and communicate the most pressing water issues to both the UN and the private sector. For example, UN-Water aligns UN entities around shared SDG 6 priorities by setting the themes for events such as World Water Day and World Toilet Day, while the UN Global Compact translates that agenda into corporate engagement, using its Communication on Progress platform for corporate water disclosure and its Water Action Hub to surface tools and opportunities for private sector action.

The three remaining roles—**norms and standards setter, policy and systems enabler, and data and evidence provider**—are core roles, undertaken by most or all UN entities as they relate to their mandates and themes. For example, UNESCO leads this work as it relates to groundwater, whereas the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands leads the same work as it relates to wetlands. Much of this standard-setting work is developed with and for governments, but a growing share is aimed directly at business. The UN Global Compact, a founding partner of the Science Based Targets Network (SBTN), contributes to the normative guidance that helps companies set science-based targets for water and nature, while its own CEO Water Mandate offers two decades of practitioner-focused guidance for business, including on Contextual and Enterprise Water Targets, benefit accounting for nature-based solutions, biodiversity, WASH, and Positive Water Impact (PWI) implementation. For these roles, this white paper maps the norms, standards, regulatory guidance and datasets that UN entities provide across the water value chain, with a fuller mapping of topics, UN involvement and points of contact set out in [Appendix C](#). This mapping is not intended as a comprehensive account of all relevant UN activity, but as a guide to the most relevant work for private sector actors seeking a first point of contact. Together, Sections 3 through 5 set out complementary roles the UN and private sector can play in partnering effectively on SDG 6, how that partnership takes shape in practice, and who the private sector should approach to begin. Section 6 turns to how the 2026 UN Water Conference can be used to showcase this framework and launch it into action.



Next Steps

Leveraging the UN Water Conference to launch collaboration pathways

This white paper has examined the opportunity to accelerate SDG 6 action and the factors shaping that opportunity today (Section 1: The Opportunity to Strengthen Private Sector Engagement on SDG 6); the distinctive strengths that position UN entities to partner with the private sector on SDG 6 (Section 2: Distinctive Strengths); what different actors can do to accelerate action (Section 3: Partnership Roles); how these roles come together in real-world partnership archetypes (Section 4: Partnership Archetypes) and who within the UN system is best placed to lead these partnerships (Section 5: Private Sector Entry Points). Together, these sections point to a single conclusion. The UN system delivers its greatest value not as a single, homogeneous actor, but through a coordinated implementation model that draws on the normative, scientific, policy, financing and implementation strengths of its different entities. No single UN entity can offer the private sector everything it needs on SDG 6, but collectively, and by directing partners to the entity best placed to hold each role, the UN

system can offer a comprehensive and credible partner across the full range of constraints slowing SDG 6 progress. Realizing that potential depends on making this framework explicit and navigable for the private sector, so that partnerships form deliberately around comparative advantages to accelerate action on SDG 6.

What follows from this white paper will be a flagship report outlining the business case for SDG 6 action by the private sector, showcasing ambitious and impactful initiatives and specifying the potential pathways to take the work forward over the next two years through a UN-private sector water action blueprint. Through its launch at the UN Water Conference 2026, the report aims not only to inspire action but to incentivize it from a commercial perspective and to make it possible from a practical and operational perspective in an effort to tangibly contribute to the acceleration of SDG 6 action.

Appendix A

To validate UN entities' differentiating characteristics which strengthen its role as a private sector partner, UN entities were benchmarked over 17 qualitative and quantitative metrics against a selection of six INGOs working toward the achievement of four or more SDG 6 indicators across at least 10 countries. Benchmarked INGOs are anonymized and the comparison of quantitative metrics is outlined below.

Quantitative metrics assessed	UN entities and UN-Water ⁵	Multi-sector humanitarian INGO	Service-delivery WASH INGO	Nature-focused INGO	Land and water conservation INGO	Global conservation INGO	Science-based conservation INGO
Country footprint	190+	100+	10+	100+	100+	100+	150+
Country offices	180+	50+	20+	30+	30+	80+	50+
Private sector partners	<5	10+	20+	100+	10+	500+	n/a
Government partners	100+	10+	20+	50+	80+	50+	30+
Multistakeholder events held in '25	80+	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5
% government funding	75%+	~25%	<25%	~25%	<25%	<25%	~50%
Opensource datasets and tools	20+	n/a	<5	<5	~10	<5	300+
Published thought leadership pieces ('25)	~10	n/a	~15	~25	~10	<5	~40
Annual budget (FY25; USD Mn)	1500+	500–1000	0–500	0–500	1000–1500	0–500	0–500

5. For the benchmarking exercise, UN entities are assessed for all metrics besides “open datasets and tools” and “published thought leadership”. For these two metrics, UN-Water is used for benchmarking, since it co-publishes reports and coordinates the data made available on the SDG 6 data portal.

Appendix B

Partnership Archetypes – Additional Case Studies

Procuring Water Systems at Global Scale (UNICEF Supply Division)

Archetype 2: Procuring and delivering solutions

Communities, schools and health facilities across multiple countries require reliable water systems suited to different groundwater, energy and operating conditions. UNICEF Supply Division develops technical guidance and procures handpumps, motorized pumps and solar-powered systems from private suppliers for country programmes. UNICEF country offices then work with governments, contractors and local operators to construct and install systems, provide spare parts and strengthen local maintenance capacity. Between

2018 and 2021, UNICEF procured almost 20,000 pumps for 33 countries, demonstrating how UN procurement and delivery capabilities can connect fragmented local needs with private-sector equipment and implementation capacity at scale. UNICEF's role combines delivery and implementation partner with capability builder and technical adviser; private suppliers are the solution providers and implementers. The archetype advances SDG indicator 6.1.1 on drinking water.

Source: UNICEF Supply Division.

Applying UN-Backed Contextual Water Targets Globally (The Coca-Cola Company)

Archetype 3: Shaping market standards

The Coca-Cola Company adapted the UN Global Compact CEO Water Mandate's Contextual Water Targets Guidance into its watershed health planning process. The framework uses local assessments, stakeholder input and recognized water-stewardship principles to identify shared challenges, determine desired outcomes and develop context-specific interventions. Coca-Cola's regional teams then work with technical and local partners to translate these assessments into stewardship plans and projects.

Coca-Cola has assessed approximately 700 locations for water-related sourcing and operational risk, with around 32% of facilities classified as high-risk locations (HRLs). Under its updated environmental goals, the company conducts watershed assessments and implements targeted actions across the watersheds associated with all HRLs, with a goal of achieving 100% replenishment in each HRL by 2035.

Source: CEO Water Mandate; The Coca-Cola Company.

Implementing UN Developed Positive Water Impact Framework (Nike)

Archetype 3: Shaping market standards

In 2024 Nike became an early adopter of the UN Global Compact CEO Water Mandate's Positive Water Impact (PWI) framework, integrating its principles into the company's broader Nature Positive strategy. Updated from the earlier Net Positive Water Impact (NPWI) framing, the PWI framework supports companies in moving beyond operational water efficiency to basin-level resilience through three pillars: improving water efficiency and reducing pollution, advancing contextual water stewardship, and investing in collective action. Nike applies this approach to help prioritize

water-stressed geographies, inform basin-specific stewardship strategies, and align water management with biodiversity, climate, and community wellbeing objectives across its global value chain. By leveraging the CEO Water Mandate's guidance, technical tools, and peer learning network, Nike is embedding water stewardship into business decision-making while supporting access to clean water and strengthening the resilience of the watersheds and communities on which its supply chain depends.

Source: UN Global Compact CEO Water Mandate.

Scaling water-efficiency solutions across an industrial park (Hiep Phuoc & UNIDO)

Archetype 4: Scaling up innovation

Hiep Phuoc Industrial Park in Viet Nam joined UNIDO's Global Eco-Industrial Parks Programme to improve resource efficiency and accelerate its transition towards an eco-industrial park. UNIDO assessed opportunities across 31 tenant companies—90 percent of them SMEs—and supported company teams through technical training, implementation planning and follow-up. The assessments identified 305 resource-efficient and cleaner-production solutions; by September 2023, 104 had been implemented and a further 68 were planned. Water-focused measures included monitoring systems, water recycling and reuse, and employee training, reducing water consumption by up to 151,220 m³ annually. Wider resource-efficiency measures generated reported

savings of US\$987,204 per year. The park also established a dedicated team to monitor environmental, social and economic performance, helping institutionalize continued improvement and increasing its compliance with the International Eco-Industrial Park Framework from 44 percent in 2020 to 76 percent by the end of 2023. UNIDO acted as an innovation catalyst and as a capability builder and technical adviser, while park management and tenant companies implemented and operated the solutions. The case demonstrates how UN support can move proven approaches from assessment to adoption across multiple firms rather than leaving them as isolated pilots.

Source: UNIDO, Global Eco-Industrial Parks Programme.

Building Shared Resilience across Indian River Basins (Women + Water Collaborative)

Archetype 5: Building shared resilience

Communities and corporate value chains across India's Krishna and Godavari basins face water scarcity, inadequate sanitation and growing climate risks. In 2023, Gap Inc., Cargill and GSK, in partnership with WaterAid and the Water Resilience Coalition, launched the Women + Water Collaborative around shared goals, metrics and governance. The Collaborative has since grown to ten corporate and foundation partners: Gap Inc., Cargill, GSK, Levi Strauss & Co., The Coca-Cola Foundation, Veralto, ClearBridge, Cummins, Google and BESTSELLER Foundation. The initiative supports water replenishment, climate-resilient WASH services and women's participation in water and sanitation governance, and has since expanded into the Ganga Basin, demonstrating how a UN-linked collective-action platform can coordinate companies from different sectors around shared geographic

water outcomes. The Water Resilience Coalition provides the collective-action platform and plays a trusted convenor and matchmaker role, while participating companies act as market enablers. Reported outcomes across the programme include more than 173,000 people reached with improved access to safe drinking water and sanitation services, approximately 225,000 cubic meters of volumetric water benefit generated through water-replenishment interventions, and more than 4,500 women leaders trained to strengthen women's participation in WASH governance. The programme has also supported agricultural water-efficiency activities. The archetype supports progress towards SDG indicator 6.1.1 on safely managed drinking water services, SDG indicator 6.2.1 on safely managed sanitation services, and SDG indicator 6.b.1 on community participation in water and sanitation management.

Source: WaterAid; CEO Water Mandate

Appendix C

C.1 Mapping of UN entities' work on "Norms and standards setter" and "Policy and Systems enabler" roles

Regulatory topic		Description of UN system regulatory and normative action	Key UN entities involved
1.1	Glacier & headwater governance	Supports governments to integrate glacier and snowmelt dynamics into national water policy, climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction and transboundary river basin management	• UNESCO: Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme
1.2	Watershed, wetland and floodplain protection	Supports governments to develop legislation, permitting systems, restoration programmes and land-use regulations to protect water ecosystems from pollution and drainage	• Ramsar: Wetlands Guidance Handbook Series
2.1	Groundwater abstraction, borehole drilling and water rights	Supports governments to regulate groundwater abstraction, licensing, borehole permitting, monitoring, groundwater quality, aquifer protection and water-use rights	• UNESCO: Groundwater Governance Project
2.2	Desalination health, environmental standards and governance	Provides guidance on drinking-water safety, source-water management, treatment controls, brine disposal, chemical discharge, and regulatory frameworks for desalination	• World Health Organization (WHO): Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality; Desalination Guidelines • World Bank: Desalination and Reuse Series • UNEP: Guidance on brine and chemical discharges
3.1	Drinking water quality and safety plans	Supports governments to establish national drinking water quality regulations, health-based water quality standards and risk-based Water Safety Plans (WSPs)	• WHO: Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality; Water Safety Plan Manual
4.1	Financing laws, tariffs and affordability rules	Supports governments to improve budget planning, ensure clear internal roles and responsibilities and design finance/tariff approaches that protect affordability	• UNICEF: WASHREG methodology
4.2	Sanitation regulation and service-chain standards	Helps governments define and strengthen regulation across the sanitation service chain, including toilets, containment, conveyance, treatment and safe disposal and reuse	• WHO and UNICEF: Roadmap for Advancing Sanitation Regulation
4.3	Agriculture-specific water governance	Supports regulation of irrigation management, water user associations, agricultural water allocation, irrigation service fees, water productivity and water-use efficiency	• FAO: Guidelines on calculating agricultural water use, water quality and safety guidelines etc.
5.1	Wastewater treatment, industrial discharge and reuse	Supports legal and regulatory frameworks for wastewater treatment, pollution control, discharge standards, industrial/municipal wastewater management, and reuse	• UNEP: Global Wastewater Initiative • UNIDO: Resource Efficient and Cleaner Production (RECP) Programme

5.2	Industrial discharge	Supports governments and industry to prevent water pollution from industrial effluents, improve industrial water productivity, and adopt pollution-prevention technologies	• UNIDO: Resource Efficient and Cleaner Production Methodology • UNEP: Industrial Wastewater Guidance
5.3	Agricultural run-off	Supports policy to reduce agricultural water pollution from fertilizers, pesticides, livestock waste, drainage, salinity and sediment loads, and to manage water-quality risks	• FAO: Global review of water pollution from agriculture
6.1	Wastewater reuse	Supports governments to create enabling policies, regulations and safety frameworks for treated wastewater reuse, including reuse in agriculture, industry, urban systems and resource recovery	• WHO: Guidelines for the Safe Use of Wastewater, Excreta and Greywater; Sanitation Safety Planning • UNIDO: Resource Efficient and Cleaner Production (RECP) Programme
6.2	Environmental and ecosystem protection against pollution	Supports governments to develop policies protecting rivers, wetlands, mangroves and coastal ecosystems from land-based sources of marine pollution	• UNEP: Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities
	Cross-cutting	Provides normative guidance and practical tools for businesses to set and report on water stewardship commitments across all stages of the value chain	• UN Global Compact: CEO Water Mandate; founding partner of the Science Based Targets Network (SBTN)

C.2 Mapping of UN entities' work on "Data and evidence provider" role

Data topic		Description of UN system regulatory action	Key UN entities involved
1.1	WMO Cryosphere-related datasets	The Global Terrestrial Network for Glaciers (GTN-G), Global Cryosphere Watch (GCW) and Global Snow Watch support water availability forecasting, hydropower planning, infrastructure design and water-risk assessments. Informed the UN World Water Development report "Mountains and Glaciers: Water Towers"	• WMO
1.2	SDG 6 Data portal: water quality & transboundary cooperation	Country-level data on ambient water quality (SDG 6.3.2) and transboundary water cooperation (SDG 6.5.2). Supports sustainable water sourcing, basin-level risk assessments, cross-border investments and corporate water stewardship	• UNESCO • UNEP
1.3	Ramsar sites information service on global wetlands	Official global database of all Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites), which can be used for water risk assessments, environmental impact assessments and investment decisions on nature-positive and investments which support water risk adaptation and biodiversity	• Ramsar
2.1	IGRAC Global Groundwater Information System (GGIS)	Global database of aquifers, groundwater recharge, abstraction and hydrogeology. Supports groundwater sourcing, site selection, water security assessments and sustainable abstraction planning	• UNESCO
2.2	UN Freshwater Ecosystems explorer	Interactive platform mapping rivers, lakes, wetlands and reservoirs, including water ecosystem data (SDG 6.6.1). Helps companies identify water-related ecosystem risks, source water sustainably and support nature-positive investments	• UNEP

2.3	Ocean Data and Information Systems (ODIS)	Global marine observations including ocean conditions, biodiversity and coastal information. Supports sustainable desalination projects, coastal infrastructure, ports and offshore industries	• UNESCO
3.1	UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) data portal	Country-level data on drinking water and sanitation governance, financing and institutional capacity. Helps companies identify water treatment investment opportunities and potential public-private partnerships	• WHO • UNICEF
4.1	SDG 6 data portal: water use efficiency, water stress, IWRM and WASH coverage	Country-level data on water use efficiency (6.4.1), water stress (6.4.2), integrated water resources management (6.5.1) and WASH coverage (6.1.1 and 6.2.1). Supports market assessments, water risk screening, ESG benchmarking and opportunities for WASH infrastructure implementation across countries	• UNICEF • WHO • UNEP
4.2	AQUASTAT Water Data Portal on water withdrawal and management	Global database on renewable water resources and sectoral water withdrawals across industry, services and agriculture. Supports water management, availability assessments, facility siting, supply chain planning and water allocation analyses for private sector players in agriculture, services and industry	• FAO
4.3	WaPOR database on agricultural water productivity	Satellite-based data on evapotranspiration, biomass production and agricultural water productivity. Helps agribusinesses optimize irrigation, improve water efficiency and strengthen climate resilience	• FAO
5.1	AQUASTAT Wastewater Module on municipal wastewater	Country-level statistics on municipal wastewater generation, treatment and reuse. Helps identify markets for wastewater infrastructure, water reuse projects and circular water investments	• FAO
5.2	SDG 6 Data portal on wastewater treatment	Country-level data on the proportion of domestic and industrial wastewater safely treated (SDG 6.3.1). Supports infrastructure investment planning, market prioritization and benchmarking of wastewater management	• WHO • United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)
6.1	GEMStat freshwater quality data portal	Global repository of in situ freshwater quality measurements from rivers, lakes, reservoirs and groundwater. Supports source water monitoring, pollution risk assessments, compliance, ESG reporting and watershed management	• UNEP

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